

AMIEL



MYRTLE JOHNSTON

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A NOVEL BY
MYRTLE JOHNSTON



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AMIEL

CHAPTER I

I

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to introduce to you Mr. Amiel Gilchrist."

"He was such a darling little boy," whispered Lady Kitteredge to Molly, "the loveliest eyes, like yellow and brown pansies! And such appealing ways! He'd had too much spoiling, but it hadn't seemed to have affected him in the least."

"But it is not merely a pleasure. It is also my very great privilege—a privilege we all share in this drawing-room to-night—the privilege, that is, of being the first section of the public to hear the story of Mr. Gilchrist's—er—magnificent achievement."

"The sunniest little creature—"

"To hear of that achievement from Mr. Gilchrist's own lips, and before its official recognition, of course greatly enhances the privilege. And our thanks are more than ever due to the—er—gracious influence which has so prevailed—happily prevailed—over natural—er—modesty as to induce him to speak to us to-night."

"'Gracious influence!' That's all Charlie knows about it. I was set on it, my dear, and Amiel simply saw it was hopeless to resist. The gentlest little soul—he must have been, let me see, six or seven. And the happiest in his serious little way."

"The majority of us at some time in our lives go travelling—"

"Too serious we used to think. And then fizz! One of his tricks you'd never suspect."

"What is it we seek from foreign travel for pleasure?" said the chairman's rich, droning voice. "Change? Excitement? Escape from the familiarity of our daily life—"

"But nothing harmful. Just mischievous pranks that made you laugh."

"We may cross the Channel to find it, or the Atlantic. Of course, we all know and admire, and—may I whisper it?—avoid, if we can manage it gracefully—those hardy spirits whose idea of travel is nothing—er—more comfortable than Nairobi or nearer than Tibet. But even they, whether baking in the tropics or—er—quaking in the snows—"

"I hope Charlie's not going to make a fool of himself in the chair. . . . Yes, the kind of placid child that's no trouble to anyone—"

"—they still, in the main, enjoy—let us say enjoy—their grilling or chilling, as the case may be, on the beaten track, in the sense that they still follow, in those desolate but documented regions, a marked trail.

"It is the lot of few of us to stand at where the marked trail ends, and to step from it into the unmarked. To penetrate nature at its most awful and most secret. To step from the light into the dark—"

"He was the friendliest little soul I ever saw. No shyness—it didn't matter who you might be—"

"In short, to withdraw from the known world as completely as though transferring to another planet. Such a traveller is Captain Scott—I will not say '*was*,' until evidence forces us to abandon hope for the expedition which sailed in the *Discovery* last year." A murmur of

pained interest. "Such a traveller is Commander Peary whose discovery of the North Pole fired us but three short years ago—"

"He'd slip his hand into yours in the little soft, confiding way he had. Oh, always completely self-possessed, but not *forward* in the way children nowadays—"

"Mr. Gilchrist's no less adventurous quest was undertaken in regions some distance to the south of those conquered by Commander Peary and by land instead of by sea—in the Kolymsk Mountains of Eastern Siberia."

"But too tender-hearted for a boy. He wouldn't eat if wasps were killed at table. My dear I remember he had a earwig—"

"Very little is known about these mountains—indeed, beyond the fact of their existence, nothing. I will confess I had to take down the map to see exactly where they are—in northeast Siberia, in the district known as the Yakutsk.

"In the immense forests which guard their slopes it is fairly certain no white man had ever penetrated until, eighteen months ago, Mr. Gilchrist commanded his private expedition from Irkutsk, through dangers and difficulties in that terrible region which almost defy belief, into their unknown recesses."

"The last thing any of us ever imagined he'd do. The very last thing."

"You've known him always?" whispered Molly.

"Oh, my dear, his poor mother was my cousin. The most unfortunate marriage—"

"Mr. Gilchrist, I hope he will pardon my remarking, does not at all conform in appearance to my notion—I suppose the usual notion—of the stern and intrepid ex-

plorer. But in fact we are having to amend our ideas of these pioneers who, it would seem, carry civilization into the wilds rather than bring—er—uncouthness back from them.

“Of Mr. Gilchrist’s intrepidity, at any rate, I leave you to judge until you have heard his doubtless—er—modest account of the—er—dangers and difficulties he experienced on his daring venture.

“Mr. Gilchrist comes to us from Siberia, that region of mystery and winter where he has been for nine years, accomplishing, I understand, much valuable research. I am requested to ask you, in view of his recent very serious illness—a consequence of the Kolymsk expedition—to excuse him from standing to address you.”

“He must have half died, Molly. The Russian step-sister brought him to us at Cannes in January. I was so shocked, I couldn’t believe it was he. I’d seen him last when he was seven—such a little pet! The very last thing I could have dreamed—very wonderful, of course. Good heavens, I hope he’s not going to be nervous.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Gilchrist.”

There was applause. The chairman, Lady Kitteredge’s brother-in-law, a retired consul from somewhere South American, sat down, to everyone’s relief. The other chair was an armchair set close to the piano which had been pushed to one side of the dais—this was not one of Lady Kitteredge’s musical occasions. For an instant, as nothing happened and the chairman sat down, she wished it was. She caught the chairman’s eye and raised her eyebrows at him. The chairman leaned over to the armchair. After another minute, Mr. Gilchrist stood up slowly and made a formal, foreign little bow. He then turned round

to face the piano, and pushed at the lid. The lid was locked. This action caused a stiffening of surprise in his audience. Perhaps he sensed it. He turned from the piano and sank again into his armchair where he remained. His audience sat politely. Lady Kitteredge's lace-edged handkerchief, squeezed into a ball, grew hot against her palm. Molly looked at the lecturer. She was apt to ask a question of every stranger's face and then, more often than not, to turn away and never ask anything from him again. (Often he asked her to marry him.) The shaded lamplight in Lady Kitteredge's drawing-room scarcely veiled the lecturer's face from the penetration with which Molly's eyes questioned strangers. She had excellent eyesight.

The rounded, massive, topheavy forehead struck her. There was the serene, large scale, classic and rather heavy sculpture of a statue's face, but the statue was broken. The forehead stood, undamaged in the original noble modelling, above a blurring and a blunting and a disruption—and an immaturity for a man in his thirties. His chin was round with a cleft. His full lips quivered with nervousness. His thick hair was fair, with a faint sheen in the lamplight. His straight, thick eyebrows were fair. His eyelids drooped so as to cover his eyes, his fair eyelashes were so long that the lamplight gilded their tips. He did not look very ill, for his face had been browned lightly in the sun at Cannes. But all his movements were slow. It was a broad figure, but there was no tautness. He had stood slackly. He kept his left hand in his coat pocket. He never moved it from there, even when he had risen and bowed.

Contrary to Lady Kitteredge's hopes, he was horribly nervous. Molly had never in her life so tingled at the spec-

tacle of paralysing inability to address an audience. She had had something to do with amateur acting, but stage fright was nothing to this. He sat perfectly still, his hand in his pocket, not able to raise his eyes. A nerve in his cheek pulsed, and he was weighted with the paralysis. It was indecent that, with his miserable self-consciousness, his quivering face yet showed every reflection of the torture. He could not meet their eyes, yet he was naked to them. Molly thought, as the moments crawled, that if a picture could be painted of them all as they were in that room, it would seem the picture of a condemned prisoner before his judges. And she began to feel as if they were in a picture and that they must remain, fixed to their chairs, watching his misery, and he must stay there in front of them with his eyes on the floor and the nerve twitching.

Her anger rose at Lady Kitteredge's "gracious influence." He should not have been subjected to this ordeal. She glanced round at his audience and saw all the degrees of well-bred embarrassment. He took them by surprise when, not raising his eyes or his voice, he began to speak. His voice was so soft that they had to lean forward to hear him.

"Amiel!" said Lady Kitteredge rather shrilly. "A little louder please! We can't hear." She smiled determinedly at Molly. "A charming voice, don't you think?" she whispered.

"Yes," said Molly.

"But I'm afraid *not* the resonance to fill a hall."

"And not the pace," Molly thought, listening painfully.

He dredged a word up from unknown depths and let it fall simply into the strained atmosphere. He spoke with-

out notes, which was unfortunate. It was true that, now that he had made the effort, he did not appear to be so nervous. It was they who were embarrassed—by the long halts in the middle of sentences, as by the rambling tangling of threads. He gave no sign of noticing their embarrassment. As though all time was before him, he searched for his word. When it came it was either hackneyed, or else childishly inadequate. He dredged for outworn literary clichés. "The trackless forest," he said. Struck by the phrase, he paused and seemed to dwell in his mind on the picture it called up.

The party had consisted of five sledges drawn by reindeer. They had shot bears for their food. Molly's vivid imagination soared off from the inadequate words. She saw the forests with their lichens where there was night, but no day. Sitting among the beautifully dressed audience of his friends, the London sounds of a June night coming softly through the open windows, she chafed under his unbearable diction and she caught something of the desolation and the triumph. How young his face was! She tried to imagine that voice raised in authority, as the head of the party, and found it beyond her.

His voice sounded very tired. It was the timbreless voice of physical weakness. But in its clouding softness and huskiness, it was, as Lady Kitteredge said, a voice of charm. Its accent teased her. He pronounced not absolutely like an Englishman and yet scarcely like a foreigner. She remembered then that he was half a Russian, and that English might not be perfectly familiar to him.

His eyes were on the polished floor of the dais. Lost in contemplating it, it seemed he forgot what he was at. Lady Kitteredge sharply cleared her throat. He had been de-

scribing a blizzard which, with appalling rapidity, had engulfed one of the sledges and its occupants before they could be saved. At his patron's signal, he lifted his eyes for the first time, to meet theirs all fixed on him with an assumption of interested attention.

His voice ceased. Turning his head, he sunk his forehead against his right hand the elbow of which rested on the chairarm.

The chairman apprehensively waited, then leaned over the table to him with the glass of water. His hand took it.

"A wreck before they brought him down to us!" Lady Kitteredge's whisper pierced Molly. "A complete wreck, physical and mental. Oh, dear, he's let the tumbler go!"

The sharp crash of the glass appeared to steady the speaker. He looked down at the fragments. He did not apologise. The pulse in his cheek throbbing, he ended his lecture with some coherence, and people got up and moved about.

"Wonderful what human beings will do!"

"Quite extraordinary."

"I heard Nansen lecture when he was here as Minister. Oh, a very fine speaker."

"My dear, John gave me the emeralds—"

"Mr. Gilchrist—Miss Willoughby. She's the hardest girl in London. But you'll be nice to him, Molly!"

Molly looked slightly upward into his alight, topaz-coloured eyes. "What's wrong with them?" she thought. "Yes, what?" They were open wide and lit with such startled admiration that Molly, so admired, looked down from the naked thing.

"She's heard all about the earwig, Amiel." Lady Kitter-

edge said hysterically. A hopeless puzzlement made his face heavy.

"The earwig?" he repeated.

"Don't you remember—when you and your mother stayed with us before she took you to Edinburgh. You were six, or was it seven? You were so fond of animals, and we couldn't allow you to keep a pet. Someone found an earwig in a peach and you wouldn't let them kill it. 'Can I have that for my pet?' you said. (You were a pet yourself in your little white tunic and knickers!)

"'Oh,' your cousin Ned, my husband, said, 'it's a nasty ugly thing. No one likes *them*.' And what did you say? 'Then that's why *I* like them.' Dear, how we laughed, Molly!"

Guessing such nursery reminiscences to be embarrassing, Molly could only again seek his eyes before a terrible old woman in peacock-blue satin with a band of diamonds round her throat, had hobbled up and tapped his left arm with 'an ear-trumpet.

"Hand out of your pocket, young man! Young Tony Kitteredge has been telling me. But *you*, I understand, didn't tell us about the wolves just now, did you? How many fingers did they get? Out with it, no nonsense! It was that fool Coriolanus who wouldn't show his scars of honour."

His face went slowly a painful dark red. He hung his head. Molly saw the convulsive contraction of the hand in his pocket. She felt strong pity for his embarrassment. "Silly old fool," she thought, "I hope he snubs her!"

But he said nothing, as if he didn't know how to snub anyone; and slowly he brought the hand up, and held it

out stiffly in front of him. The third and fourth fingers were uneven stumps.

"Don't be ashamed of that hand, Mr.—— I can't be bothered with your name. It isn't everyone who fights wolves. If you keep it in your pocket it'll grow there."

Lady Kitteredge clasped his other arm.

"Amiel,—Nan—Lady Nan Heston—she's over there talking to Tony—I want you to meet her."

Lady Kitteredge was doing her utmost, her very utmost, to launch the little boy who had wanted the earwig. But not all lions are made in an evening. "Any more," she argued to herself—"than a first dead failure necessarily argues a second and third. The thing is to have him met and talked about." The society press could do something. She knew everyone, and lovely, popular, Molly Willoughby might help her.

II

Molly, in the season of 1912, was twenty-four. She lived with an uncle who had been her guardian, and who had neglected her in her early childhood when her parents died. All his life since, he had been trying to make up to her for his neglect. He was completely subservient to her. He adored her, and Molly was very fond of him.

It hurt him to hear her disapproved of. He would never censure her because he blamed himself for all the things censured in her. Her quiet, invincible disregard of opinion, her graceful flouting of rules—the knowledge preyed on him of what had fostered these. Her flippancies reproached him because he thought they hid undying resentment against him. If Molly had known this she would have been

astounded and tender and a little impatient. But she did not even guess it. Common sense, she was apt to take for granted in people. She did not on the whole expect much else from them. Her uncle had not her confidence because he was too timid to ask for it. She never considered whether or not she had his.

Of herself, Molly demanded hugely. She had for herself binding requirements and fastidious severity. For everyone round her, she had that impatient tenderness. Why she should be thus pledged, as it were, and they unpledged, and yet due all her tolerance, was a thing she understood in her soul, but never expressed.

She had made no intimate friends. Her reserve, like a fine sifter, would not admit them. Her tolerance, stripped, was a delicate contempt. Faced with what she despised, she was silent. She never argued. Only in secret afterwards, she more ardently pledged herself.

If her impatience expressed itself in a flash of pointed wit, getting the better of her tenderness, and hurting someone, her quick contrition was so warm that it had sometimes been misinterpreted.

She knew what it was to be exasperated with everyone she knew, the whole world of them. When that happened, she would go off abroad alone with Orange, her maid, for one month or six, to some little sleepy mountain village or ancient town.

She had six thousand a year of her own, which she took a considerable hand in managing. She scorned not to understand things. There were scandals, naturally. But the most avid smoke blower grows tired without the vestige of a fire.

She had studied at times Economics and Marx, Darwin,

mediæval history, Emerson, modern poetry and painting, and book binding—all with the concentrated absorption that could master her, and all for no reason in the world but curiosity. Her guardian, watching with his pursuing remorse, sadly fancied that these preoccupations, none of them prolonged, indicated a discontent with her life. He watched for her to find, among all her acquaintances, one companion. But Molly did not marry.

In a shelf in her bedroom were still all her childhood's books—*Amadis of Gaul*, *Castle Dangerous*, *Idylls of the King*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and the Rider Haggards.

She sang and played very well. She had studied in Paris under acknowledged masters. She sang Schumann best, but she also sang Somervell's *Maud* cycle, besides all the musical-comedy songs, and "If Pa-in-law was the Prince of Wales" just as Louie Freare sang it.

Certain music she liked to play and listen to alone.

She was an exquisite dancer. She loved Ascot and Henley, walking in the rain, hill-climbing in Scotland, clothes, looking at pictures, and taking the gates in a hunt.

It was usual for four men in each year to propose to her. She enjoyed it, and she liked, even pitied two out of the four, perhaps. But at one time or another, all the four had incurred her silence. Is it remembered that when she despised she was silent? Was she to go silent through her life?

III

Molly enjoyed the season of 1912. She was perhaps more admired than ever. There was a tirelessness about her. Her feet never ached and her face was never pale.

She danced every night till dawn and appeared before breakfast riding in the Row, in brimming spirits, with young Tony Kitteredge.

"Does your explorer ride, Tony?"

"Our explorer does nothing so jolly—or so energetic. He lies in bed, smoking Russian cigarettes, till noon, poor devil."

"Why do you call him poor?" she asked.

"To-night at the Hestons', Molly, the first waltz is ours. Don't you?" he said.

"Is it?" said Molly. She waved her crop to someone. "Don't I what?"

The young man beside her was healthy, blond and bright-eyed.

"Mother had no business to make him lecture," he said, flicking his rein. "I said all I could to ride her off it. But she was set on it."

For the first time, this young man stirred Molly to question him. She thought she had his measure beyond question, but she might have measured with too short a rule. This sometimes happened.

"Do you know him very well, Tony?"

"That's Dorothy Heston on the grey. Don't look at her—she'd never let you go by! I more or less manage his business affairs since he's been with us. He has accumulated interests on money in Scotland. His mother was Scottish, I believe. He has no more idea of business than Malcolm has. I suppose its living for so long so far out of things."

"Do you like him?" Molly still measured. Her horse bridled. She held him lightly and strongly.

"Oh—one rather can't help it. Although—" again he broke off, glancing at her. "But all this dragging him

through drawing-rooms," he began again, "is simply a torment to him. I took him out the other night with a few of the lads, and you wouldn't have known him."

"Did he enjoy it?" asked Molly.

"He forgot the Scottish," said Tony. "As a matter of fact I think he forgot a lot of things. I hope he did." Molly did not smile.

"But seriously, Molly, it makes me wonder. I can't get hold of the idea. This expedition—what fun has he really got out of it? There'll be a little kudos when it's officially recognized, some Russian scientific decoration, I daresay. But from what I can judge, any fuss will be nothing but an agony to him. He's ruined his health. In a lot of ways he's made himself incomprehensible to ordinary people—"

"In what ways?" asked Molly.

"Oh, well. Some ways. Never mind, anyhow. What I'm trying to get at is—what's it all for? It's not as if those mountains mattered tuppence ha'penny, known or unknown. Nothing important to anyone but a handful of doddering archæologists, or whatever they are, was found in them."

Molly was silent.

The young man looked at her riding beside him. Her hair under her bowler dazzled his bright blue eyes. The sunny June morning made her feel buoyant, full of strength and delight.

Lady Kitteredge showed her the photograph. Molly looked at the robust little boy, clasping a ball to his stomach. The little boy's round face was serene and meditative. His wide-open eyes were solemn. His mouth was still a baby's.

"One would expect," said Lady Kitteredge, also looking at the photograph, "*some* reserve. But I really think that the only one of us who has got at all intimate with him is Malcolm. They do picture-puzzles together up in Amiel's study."

"I've noticed," said Molly, "that men like that are often only happy with children. I suppose they feel they're not being watched."

"Of course, I opened my arms to him at Cannes when the Russian step-sister and her husband asked me to have him. I was so fond of his mother, Molly. We were in the Embassy in St. Petersburg when she married. Oh, a brilliant woman! She might have done better not to have gone back to Russia the second time. Once the break had been made, better leave it, I should have thought. But she did go back, and she took him with her." She chased some speculation. "What I mean about Amiel, Molly—"

"Is?" said Molly, waiting.

"Well, it is, my dear, that he lies in the bath for two hours *in the afternoon*. And there's cigarette ash all over the tiles."

Molly put the picture of the little boy down, and then she picked it up and looked at it again. Lady Kitteredge wanted Molly for her daughter-in-law.

"He was eight months in a sanatorium in Italy—Bordijera—" she said, "before they brought him to us. I gather the doctors there thought it a miracle that he made a recovery. They thought his mind was affected."

Molly turned to her in horror.

"That his mind might—"

"That it had gone."

Molly wore white with a blue sheen like ice over it, and her set of moonstones, at Lady Nan Heston's ball for her debutante daughter, Dorothy. Tony Kitteredge proposed to her after the supper interval and she refused him.

She was returning to the ballroom alone when she came on a figure, also solitary, leaning against the wall in the shadows of a passage.

"Good evening, Mr. Gilchrist."

He stood badly in his expensive clothes. He was holding a cigarette. He did not find a thing to say to her. But to Molly it was as if he had said something which she alone in this house to-night had been fitted to understand.

"I know," she longed to say to him. "I know it all." By that knowledge they were linked, it seemed to her, if they never spoke another word to each other.

"Do you plan to make another expedition?" she asked him.

"No," he answered in his soft voice. "I shall never make another. I've come back—"

"To—?" she prompted as he halted. The little monosyllable floated away. She glanced in the direction of the ballroom from which the Blue Danube sounded. He made no move to go back there with her, or to continue the conversation. He would have stood there in his refuge silently beside her until someone disturbed them.

Molly's imagination was fired. Her sympathy was touched on its secret soul. Her excellent eyesight was centred. Across the swirl of people which most often kept them at a distance from each other, she heard his shrunk voice, and watched his fair head and his young sagging shoulders. She watched him look away from someone who was about to call a greeting to him. She watched the hand

in his pocket nervously convulse as he was introduced to someone.

"He's making a good stand," she brooded. "But the strain tells."

One afternoon at Ranelagh after a match with the Indians, she stood at the rail surrounding the ground. She had sent Captain Percy back to their places to find her parasol so that she should be seen standing there alone. The knowledge that this was all she needed to do in a crowd which held them both, she acted on without questioning it. Yet she had not, on principle, since she grew up, allowed herself too much abandon to a mystical strain in her. At night beside her bedroom fire after a dance she might read of the Portuguese *Sonnets*—

*When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher—*

Twilight at her guardian's house in Derbyshire might darken the page of Donne:

*I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did till we loved.*

But she noticed if the lamps were late.

She glanced out across the paddock, smiled, and nodded to an acquaintance, drawing on her gloves. She turned leisurely.

He was wearing dark glasses. His eyes, he told her when she asked him, had been weakened for strong sunlight by his time in the Arctic.

"What a pity!" she said impulsively. The ponies were being ridden in close beneath the multi-coloured crowd in

the stand opposite, under the brilliant sky. "You must feel as if you were looking out from a darkened room."

He stood so close to her that his arm with the hand in his pocket almost touched her. Pity for that hand took Molly, together with a rushing sense of her own exuberant youth and vitality beside him. She downed the pity, exasperated.

He spoke suddenly, of his own volition. Molly had waited, clawing with impatience, while she smiled and gazed emptily across the paddock. They had so little time.

"There are so many people," he said gently, his face turned from her.

Captain Percy was in the distance. She said with passion. "Why do you let them make you afraid? How dare you allow them to be sorry for you? They don't understand you, they never will. Don't *care!*"

"Your sunshade, Miss Molly."

"Oh, thank you, Captain Percy. Goodbye, Mr. Gilchrist."

"Goodbye."

IV

She heard that he had accepted an invitation to give some archæological data of his expedition to the Kennard Archæological Research Society.

She was a fighter, and she thrilled to the stand he was making.

Professor Hilding, a member of this exclusive, devoted, small society, was one of Molly's clever friends. She had several of these.

"Now this won't be a popular lecture, young woman."

"It'll be good for me," she pleaded meekly. "It's time I

discovered some archæology. Besides the society will simply take me for your secretary."

"A nice reputation I should acquire in that case, minx!"

The lecture took place in a room off the society's tiny museum in Putney. When the speaker appeared, she had a stab of anxiety. He saw her and some colour came, in a schoolboyish way, into his face. He moved with a cautious deliberation, as if he had to think first and make sure that each movement was the right one. He looked exhausted.

But when he began, she recognised that he was more self-assured than she had ever seen him. Gone was the immobilising inability to start and the abashed keeping his eyes down. His eyelids drooped, but it was a natural position of protection against the light.

He began in his low voice, explaining with a hesitating, but rather attractive, diffidence that he was himself no archæologist. The scientific gentlemen of the party, whose names he did not feel at liberty prematurely to disclose, were at present in St. Petersburg, together with the records and photographs of the expedition. He could give the learned society only a slight idea of what these records would make known. He begged the society's indulgence for his inexpert knowledge and poor descriptive powers.

So far, not so bad. He did not seem nervous this time. The long pauses and inconclusive sentences, where the sense was bogged, were those of a man unused to communicating his thoughts at length by the spoken word; a man of long solitude, speaking now in a language for many years unfamiliar to him.

The material of this lecture was, of course, out of Molly's sphere. The drawled terms, "Lacustrine," "Kurgan," "Yeniseian," conveyed nothing to her. But as the

speaker dragged on, and she sat, her nerves tense in sympathy with the effort he was making, her indignation mounted at the behaviour of her fellow listeners. How could they so give rein to their impatience? How could they be so cruel and so insulting? Professor Hilding was humping about in his chair and coughing, tugging at his beard. They were turning restlessly to glance at one another. She was torn between rage for him, and approbation for how he kept on at his pace, refusing to be disconcerted or confused. "If he got up without another word and walked out, it would serve them right," she thought.

"As I told you, our photographs are in St. Petersburg. But I've made a sketch—" he paused. "I've made a sketch from memory of these pieces of dog-harness which may interest you."

The sketch was handed round. Molly followed its progress with hardening distaste. "It might be a forged cheque," she thought hotly. "Perhaps it *isn't* expertly done." But he was not on trial before them. They were not inquisitors. Hotly and icily scornful, Molly watched Professor Hilding settle his glasses before he focussed scrutiny on the paper. He had the niggling movements of the spinsterish batchelor of sixty. What had he done with his life? When had he suffered and dared? She allowed herself a gaze of deliberate arrogance of appraisal from her glowing youth round at the sallow, spectacled faces. Poor creatures, bemused outside their sheltering cages! When a gust of the North wind met them, they looked askance because it did not speak the language of the lectern.

Professor Hilding gradually raised his head, re-fixing

his glasses higher up on his nose. He looked at the lecturer. And the lecturer, without another word, stood up and walked to the back of the platform. There was a door there. His audience was stupefied. He had not walked quickly, but he was gone before they had begun to emerge from their amazement. The chairman, recovering first, got up and hurried after him. He came back alone.

"Gentlemen—Mr. Gilchrist, owing to a sudden indisposition, finds himself unable to continue his lecture."

The chairman had a bewildered air. He stepped forward and began to mutter to the society's president.

"No indeed, Professor," Molly charmingly demurred. "I shouldn't dream of taking you away. I shall go home alone. I think I need some fresh air."

In the passage outside she whirled, with a sweep of skirts, and shot out her tongue at the door of the room she had left. She turned to see an ambiguous youth staring at her. She smiled at him and sent him to call a taxi.

Now did Molly know where she was going? She had only to speak through the tube to the driver, and he would have taken her in the opposite direction. He thought her a very beautiful, and a rather angry, lady. A lady of independent mind, whose mind was made up, and who would not take kindly to interference. You would hesitate to advise that lady.

Molly sat with her lips closed, and the terraces, the streets, and squares of her familiar world rolled by her. She spoke through the tube. "Could you drive a little faster?" she said.

She rang the bell in Portland Place and asked the footman if Mr. Gilchrist had come home.

"Her ladyship and Mr. Antony," he said as though he

could not have heard her, "are not at home, Miss Willoughby."

"Is Mr. Gilchrist home?" He paused. "Mr. Gilchrist I believe is in his study. Shall I send to inform him?"

"No. Take me to the study, Dewett."

He bowed without an eyebrow twitch. Molly did not even think of him.

Dewett opened a door on the first floor.

"Mr. Gilchrist's study," he said.

She entered the darkened room. The blinds had been drawn down. The vivid sunshine beat against them and let in a single sharp needle of light. It pointed to a box of sweets overturned on the carpet, the fondants spilled out of their little papers. A fly buzzed round the melting sugar. The chair near the door was a litter of loose cigarettes, invitations, tailor's catalogues, and she saw a five-pound note. The sofa under the windows seemed to be heaped with clothes. Her sharp observation, blinking in the semi-darkness, made out that the Chippendale desk with its handsome fittings stood empty and unlittered.

Molly stared about her.

"Not a very orderly gentleman—Mr. Gilchrist," Dewett whispered.

A plush elephant on the floor, among the scattered pieces of a picture puzzle, she knew as Malcolm's. The book lying near it must be the child's. The cover was a gay illustration, and in the shaded dimness she read the title, *The Young Arctic Adventurers*.

"Mr. Gilchrist can't have come home, Dewett."

The bedroom door opposite them opened, and he stood there. He might not have known they had come in, but he showed no surprise. He stood there in his crumpled

clothes in which it was plain to see he had been lying on his bed. It was defenceless exposure. In his eyes she read no appeal, but only the hopeless statement of a dire plight. He did not know how, or else he had no spirit, to appeal to her.

Dewett closed the door on them.

She went up to him and said: "I'm glad you did that. I would have done exactly that in your place. I came to tell you."

He looked heavily at her.

"How you must despise them!" she said. "But they're not worth your troubling about. It's because they understand nothing that you can't speak to them. It's because I think I do understand a little bit, that I consider you the bravest person I've ever known. I'll be proud if you'll count me your friend. Will you?"

She was smiling, and she stretched out her hand to him.

CHAPTER II

*8, Wilton Place
17th July, 1912*

"DEAR LADY KITTEREDGE,

"Have you missed the photograph? If you have, you will have understood by now why I couldn't ask you for it, and so have stolen it from you. But you would have given it to me for a wedding present, wouldn't you? So I'm only taking it in advance. Besides, don't you owe it to me for solving your problem? You didn't know what to do with Amiel, confess it! You have done a great deal for him, as he would be the first to admit. I will be honest and say you did too much. But now, you see, you need do nothing for him any more.

"I can hear everyone saying, 'Isn't this just like Molly! To rush off and be married without a word to a soul! Not a hint of warning! Just what we might have expected,' etc., etc., etc. My guardian will have to listen to many unpleasant verdicts summed up by people who apparently know me better than I do—of which 'Eccentric,' 'Reckless' and '*Hardened*,' may be the most charitable. But he has listened to hardly anything else since I grew up to hurry on his grey hairs. And at least he can now disclaim responsibility. So he, as well as you, should be grateful, and forgive us for escaping an important wedding and disappearing into space! I hope you will, but neither of us is asking pardon for what we are doing.

And I don't feel pledged to explanations. Other people will explain me in detail! They always do and so I leave it to them. But I feel like trying to explain a little to you, *not* in any way to justify ourselves, but because I'm so proud of loving Amiel that I want to declare it from the roof tops!

"You'll notice I say 'loving' not 'being loved by.' I can't be absolutely sure—or rather I *can* be sure and *am*, that Amiel does not love me *yet*. Not, certainly, as I love him. How shocked you will be! Not at its being so, and not even at my knowing it, but at my *writing* it. I'm worse than you thought! I'm Brazen! Very well, I am!

"I don't believe I was made to settle down and be a comfortable wife to a nice husband who would take care of me. So all the nice men may now be grateful to Providence, mayn't they? Or they ought to be.

"I believe I was made to do what I'm doing. Long ago, when I was quite little, I used to have imaginations of myself married to a man whose work would be something *great*. As I grew up I tried to fit myself, in all sorts of ways, to be a wife for that man. It didn't matter very much to me what his work was. It would be work that would be *his*, in the sense that no other person in the world but he could do it. I mean, as only Mozart could write Mozart. But, for some reason, I always believed he would be famous, with his work already respected, when I met him. And I always believed I would know him. I never imagined I would find him in such need of me as Amiel is.

"You will think, or are thinking, 'she didn't lose much time.' It isn't five weeks since you first introduced us at that lecture, which I will *never* forget. Well, do you lose

time when you see someone drowning and no one else knows how to swim? You were taking Amiel to Rosshire in August. I was going to Oban. I believe the doctors were wrong about his illness possibly affecting his mind—in fact I know it—but, to be frank, as I'm being in this letter (which, by the way you can show to anyone, except for a paragraph on page three. I'm not, after all, as brazen as *that!*) I *did* believe that he stood a fairly good chance, in the next month or two, with so much being done for him and so many surrounding him, of being driven out of his mind. I had (1) to show Amiel I could swim, and (2) to make him let me pull him to land.

“By the time you read this, we shall have been married by Registrar (in the Strand!) and be on our way to Ireland. My mother's old aunt and uncle who, did I tell you? were in London on their way to Bath to spend the autumn and winter, have lent us their house in Co. Cavan, where my mother used to live with them, for our honeymoon, and for as long afterwards as we like it. They were the only people we told. Yes, I arranged everything! Yes, I've managed it all! Yes, I might have waited until he *drowned* for Amiel to say, ‘Will you marry me, Molly?’ (Between ourselves, he never said it) But as I intend for the rest of my life to arrange his journeys and manage his practical affairs for him, I might just as well begin from the first. To give all that's in my power to the man Amiel is, to work for him later on perhaps if that's possible—anyhow, to help his work in every way it can be helped by me, is all I want while I live.

“We haven't talked much about his research work. I know it will lead us into strange, far-away places where life will often be difficult for me. I hope it will.

"I've just written 'arrange his journeys for him!' When you think of where Amiel has been, what he has faced and lived through, and brought others through! Isn't it terrible that we and our comfortable lives and our cities, where strong children can find their way through the streets, should make of him an object for our pity! Of *course* Amiel is bewildered among us! Of *course*, across the mountain of all he has experienced, which the average one of us can't even begin to guess at, he can hardly speak to us! Can you imagine what it must be to be so alone?

"You have 'made allowances for Amiel.' I've so often heard you say it, and I know it's true. You have 'made every allowance' for him. Can you understand that I shall not 'make allowance?' One does that for weakness and stupidity. It is *strength* that makes allowance. I may be so weak and/or so stupid as to try sometimes to tie Amiel with our petty standards of behaviour. (*How* petty they would show themselves in his forests! They would vanish away in the snow.) But if I do, I know he will make allowance for me. He has a large mind. I've never heard him complain against anybody. Or anything. It *maddens* me to think of people wondering at me for marrying Amiel, and saying that I 'might have done better.' Are they really so fatuous, so self-complacent? Oh, I'm *glad* we are running away! I need a separation from people as much as Amiel does.

"We're not giving anyone our Co. Cavan address. Our house will be three miles (Irish) from the village and nine from our nearest neighbours, except a doctor. So there's remoteness for Amiel and me to recover our bearings!

After which we shall sally forth with heads up and an inflated opinion of ourselves!

"You said 'Mr. Gilchrist—Miss Willoughby.' With gratitude always.

Molly

"Better *not* show this letter 'to everyone'!

"Of course we may never come back!"

"Perhaps we shall never go back, Amiel!"

But the question was, where had he come to?

He had come to a mild brown little lake which lay at their feet, out of sight of the house. No chimney of the house was visible above the encircling trees. They might be miles from it. A solitary star shone in the green sky above the trees.

"Perhaps we shall never go back!"

And snatching the hand from his pocket, Molly clasped that arm round her waist and she lifted her lips.

THE FIFTH NIGHT

While Neumann played, Michael thought of Molly. The notes of the fiddle were like those of her voice—expert training resulting in spontaneous freshness and clarity.

Blue was her colour. In a blue frock, her golden curls arranged with a blue velvet band, she sat singing, "A Voice by the Cedar Tree." "She accompanied herself with a confidence of execution which was a proof of the thorough training she had received!" No, I don't care for that," he thought. The fiddle played. Was it Molly who Michael was seeing now? Or was it someone else in a blue dress and a blue velvet band?

"Play the Spring Song, Neumann," said Francis Harte from the old sofa with the springs gone which he slept on at night.

Neumann looked very thin and hollowed in the face, standing directly under the light bulb, the fiddle wedged on his collar bone. His fingers were yellow from cigarette smoking. Neumann played in a trio at the Gazelle. He had played there even for the last five nights, for people were still going there. But he didn't have to be there until eight.

He began playing Mendlessohn's Spring Song. A pale blue sky, Michael saw, and a lake ruffled by the wind. The bog pools were sinking, children were running bare-foot. Was it, after all, the Spring Song that Molly played

on a damp afternoon in her blue dress, with her confidence of execution?

The last note on Neumann's fiddle quivered away. No one said anything.

The window of Francis Harte's room was blacked out by the hearthrug—a rug hand made in grey wool with the letter Z picked out in yellow. The rug was nailed across the window and kept flat against the pane by the pillow and bolster from his bed. The nails had been dragged out and driven in for the five mornings and evenings, so they were no longer very secure. The mortar they had dislodged from the walls lay thick under the window on the floor which had not been swept that morning. The rug was not completely light-proof, and the electric bulb had been shrouded in the leg of a pair of dark blue bathing drawers pushed over the shade. The dim glimmer left half in shadow the stuffy second-hand furniture. Under the window was Francis' desk on which the papers and newspapers had piled up until they fell off and lay on the floor round the desk where they stayed. Along the wall at right angles to the desk was the bookcase overflowing with his discoloured books, bought second hand. They had not been read for a long time, and they were never dusted.

The four young men, sprawled on the sofa and the desk chair after listening to the Spring Song, all were pale. The first and second fingers of their right hands were all deeply yellowed. But there were no more cigarettes since yesterday. All that had been left in the shops were going to the troops.

The four young men looked seedy and in poor condition. Any recruiting officer would pass them by with a

shrug of his shoulders. They did not look at one another. Each stared dreamily, each at a different spring. Each was as far from the others as their original homes lay far apart. The gas fire was blank, and the room was bitterly cold. The young men all wore their overcoats, except Hlacha and he hadn't one. Francis and the American, Falk, wore their gloves, too, but all four looked blue with cold.

Michael did not feel cold. He felt warm, thinking of Molly playing and singing. His blood seemed to be churning busily through his veins as though he were exercising, but it was the excitement of his thoughts.

Neumann played songs from films, and transcriptions of Bolero, and Lehar melodies at the Gazelle, to keep people's spirits up. Now he glanced at his watch and, jerking up his fiddle in determined haste, he began to play a Brahms sonata. As he listened, Michael was drawn forcibly away from the scene in his mind, and drawn into the music. "If I could have done this!" he thought; and, he wished passionately, while he listened, that he might have composed music. He got up, before it ended, and quietly, so as not to disturb the others, he went to the door. No one questioned his going. They believed he was going up to his wife. They had all, even Falk and Hlacha who didn't board in the house, seen that she was very beautiful and they supposed he loved her, and was tormented by anxiety for her. It was not, however, anxiety for his wife which impelled Michael to the door. It was that he wished to be out of the room when the music finished, and so avoid talking to the young men. He did not tell himself it was this. He thought he might snatch a breath of air before going up to his room to relieve

Madame Hamel, the proprietress, who was watching Moira while he was downstairs listening to the music.

The narrow hall was pitch dark. He groped on his sluggish feet to the front door and unlocked it. The narrow cobbled street was dark, not a light showed. A moon ran along behind trails of cloud. The sonata was in his ears, spilling itself from the room into the quiet street. He stood listening to it, looking up between the old houses at the sky. Two long thin white beams arched into the sky from opposite angles. They both focussed on a point, then they moved slowly apart. They seemed to rise from the two adjacent streets, but they were both many miles away. "Yet they can't pierce the clouds," he thought. As he stood watching them, the violin stopped. The three young men and Neumann were crowding into the hall behind Michael. "Caught!" he muttered in himself.

"Going out, are you?" Francis Harte asked him.

"No," said Michael. They might mean to come with him if he said yes. "As a matter of fact I'm going up to my wife."

Neumann was buttoned up in his overcoat with a red and green muffler next his sick face, and he carried his violin case.

"Please to tell me, will you?" he said shyly to Michael. "Your wife is more well, yes, no?"

"She's not better, no," said Michael. "There's been no change at all."

"It is how sad!" said Neumann. He turned to Falk. "I see from my window the car when it knock Madame in the street. I help carry her upstairs. It is no good to go to the hospital. They will not admit. They get orders to wait empty for troops. It was last week, two days before

they invade. And she does not move still?" he asked Michael.

"No, she hasn't moved," he answered.

"And it is a week she lies, and she lives still, Mr. M'Clane!"

"Yes. She's breathing," said Michael.

He set a foot on the first stair. Francis Harte set a hairy hand, smeared with printer's ink, and with the nails bitten to the quick, on Michael's arm and another on the shoulder of the young American, Falk, and swayed the two men close to each other. He swayed Michael nearly off his uncertain balance.

"This is Michael M'Clane, Falk," said Francis in his rasping brogue. "You didn't know it was him was the M'Clane that's upstairs in the room on top, did you? I only discovered it myself by luck this morning. Michael M'Clane, Falk!"

Falk's sallow, intelligent face leaped into animation. He grasped Michael's hand, grinning with pleasure.

"I'm proud to meet you, Mr. M'Clane," he said. "I read *The Ultimatum* the week it appeared. I've read it four times through since then."

"A fine book, very fine," said Francis emphatically.

"And true also," said Hlacha seriously. "I read the books of other journalists, in which they write what their papers would not print because they must be diplomatic. But in none I read all you have seen, with so much statistics. And in none I read the message you give us."

"How many journalists risk their lives to get close-ups?" Francis rasped in his tone of pugnacious enthusiasm. "When their papers, *for diplomatic reasons*, won't print the truth from them, how many correspondents

transfer on to a paper that will, but that can't pay for it? When they're expelled from the country, how many stay on in hiding, and printing a secret sheet of their own till it's made so hot for them they've got to run? Tell me that, Hlacha, or any of you?"

The four gazed at Michael as he stood a little above them on the first step of the stairs. The dim light from Francis' room made them just visible to each other in the cramped space of the hall. Their scrutiny made Michael uncomfortable. He felt his face stiffening. Hlacha said in his serious voice—his voice was so respectful it was almost reverent, "Tell me please—you write *The Ultimatum* in part on enemy territory?"

"All of it," said Michael. "I was doing the revision before I had to get out. I finished it in England."

"Got out with nothing to spare, did you?" said Falk, grinning.

"Not a lot. I was lucky." Michael tried to relax his face muscles and to stand easily talking to them.

"I'll say you were lucky," said Falk. "You know what you'd have got if you'd been unlucky. It wouldn't have been a nice, clean rifle shot. You've put it in *The Ultimatum*—what you would have got if they'd got you!"

"I would like to shake hands," said Hlacha. He took Michael's hand, and noticed the two ink-stained fingers.

"You write!" he exclaimed delightedly. "Again! Another book?"

"Sure, he's writing another book!" broke in Francis, still the enthusiastic showman. He boisterously shook Michael's shoulder. "Come on, M'Clane, tell us what it is you're at in your room up there? An appendix to *The Ultimatum*, is it?"

Michael looked into his sardonic, dark-jawed face. There must always be something derisive in his boisterousness and uncomfortable in his merriment, like an eel jumping in the frying-pan. His friendly hand on the shoulder was a clutch, with the five fingers digging into Michael's skin.

"It's not an appendix to *The Ultimatum*," said Michael, grinning to match him. "It's a novel."

"A novel!" said Falk. "A fictional treatment of the stuff of *The Ultimatum*, to reach a wider public! It's not a bad idea. Only thing is, could you do the novel with anything like the conviction?"

"You will perhaps give a reading to the Society," said Neumann.

"The Society?" Michael said.

"Oh, you'll hear about the Society," Francis bore in.

"Why does he talk so loud?" Michael thought.

"You'll hear about the Society, M'Clane. Would you give us a reading if we could manage it? Is there a fictitious thread you hang the incidents on, or how are you working it?"

"The novel's got nothing to do with *The Ultimatum*," said Michael. "It's not topical even." It was two days since he had written a word—the two days since they had taken Moira from under the car and carried her upstairs. But the warm re-surfing of his excitement overflowed into his voice. He stood quite easily now, leaning against the stair rail with Francis' clutch on his shoulder. "Very briefly," he said, "it's the study of a fellow—"

"Hear the plane!" said Hlacha to Neumann.

They all listened to the dull, hovering, zooming. It sounded slow, crass, and persistent.

"Better shut the door, Harte," said Falk. "The light from your room may be showing from here."

Francis kicked the street door shut.

"They got the gasworks last visit," he said. "What are they after this time, do you bet?"

"The betting's on the electric power station," said Falk, listening to the zoom. "They aim at complicating life for us behind the line."

"We don't get the siren," said Neumann.

Michael looked at Hlacha. "I knew I'd heard your name," he said. "I remember now. They did a play of yours at the London Arts Theatre, five years ago. A little one-acter—what was it called? *The Love Potion*. I saw it—a thing about the gipsies."

The young man looked vacant. "*The Love Potion*." He smiled politely. "You are right—yes. Five years. A long time ago. What you say in *The Ultimatum*, Mr. M'Clane, I like, 'The Communist must be the man—' "

"'Who is neither full-fed nor starving,'" Francis loudly bore him down, "'who may stand between the full-fed and his doom and between the starving and his revenge. Who may understand without the distortion of suffering, and may condemn without the poison of bitterness.'" "

"If we hold them in the north," Neumann said to Falk, "for time enough, there is time for much happening."

"They won't be through the line in a hurry. That's sure," said Falk.

"While there's time, there's hope," said Michael. He added, "So long," indiscriminately, and he began to climb the stairs.

"Madame, I hope she will be better," Neumann called earnestly after him.

"She spoke to him three times, perhaps," Michael thought, "and he's in love with her, and perhaps he'll always be."

He did not pause for his customary rest on the first landing, because he was still within sight of them by the glimmer from Francis' room. But his legs grew heavier on the second flight. When he and Moira had taken the top-floor room, he had thought that the four flights of stairs might help to strengthen his legs. "Lord, what a fool!" he said. This was how he would climb stairs when he was eighty, dragging one foot after the other, and pulling himself by the banisters, and this was how his legs would feel then.

There was Miss Jardine's door, with the bright line under it. She would be sitting up in bed in her pink woolly dressing-jacket, playing patience and eating something. The next door was the refugees from the north, the mother and four children. Madame Hamel normally took only Britons and Americans as lodgers, but there were now few of these in the house. She was filling her rooms all the same, with those who could pay her.

He had reached the top of the third flight. The carpet was thinner and the stairs narrower, just as their finances had thinned and their choice of lodgings had narrowed. The rooms they had had a month ago in the south part of the town, Moira had said would be the worst, and that it was something to have come to the worst, anyhow! But at least the boards of their bedroom there had been stained.

"That plane is still circling." As he rested on the third landing, leaning against the banister, the zoom of the

plane's engine filled his ears, and four rapid explosions, like a giant knocking at the house walls, deafened him and shook the banisters and the floor under his feet. He fell on his hands and knees. There was silence then. He scrambled to his feet, pulling at the banisters, and the remote wail of the siren slid up and sobbed.

"She should never have been carried up these stairs!" They might have killed her, turning and twisting round the corners with her on a mattress. He should have stood out for a room being emptied for her on the ground floor. "I couldn't have paid the rent of it, but I could have got over that somehow, couldn't I?"

He had followed the mattress upstairs like a man dazed.

There was strange utter quietness, in which the siren sounded pointless. Moira must be all right or Madame would have opened the door and called out.

He reached his door at last, and turned the handle.

The room was an attic, or a bedroom for two servants. There was a square of brown carpet, which had grown too old for a third-floor bedroom, on the unpainted wooden boards. The plaster of the walls was dirty and dented with small crumbling holes. There was a wardrobe, a chest of drawers which was the dressing-table, and a washstand. Under the window was Michael's black enamelled iron bedstead. Madame Hamel, in one of her vigils by Moira's bed, had sewn the black sateen linings he had bought into the drab-coloured window curtains, and she had made a shade for the light out of an old black silk petticoat. He was surprised and grateful that she should be so good to him. He could not guess what he would have done without her. She stood outside the red screen which was faded in large patches. She had

fetched it up from somewhere and placed it between Moira's bed and the window and door, to protect the bed from draughts. She was a woman of thirty-six, and was tall, with a slender figure that drooped. Her face, pale and rather childish without being youthful, had the ageless look of nuns' faces. She was always working, but she did not seem always to see what she worked at. She had a vague look of being bewildered to find herself polishing and scrubbing. Sometimes she worked with a fevered, flurried air of being hunted. But never did she look efficient.

"Oh, my God, Mr. M'Clane," she said when she saw him, "them were bombs, were they? Oh, they put the heart across me. I said to myself my last hour was come." She spoke in a soft, slipshod Dublin voice. She had been sixteen years married to M. Achille Hamel, but she was, he knew because she had told him, from Dublin, the North Circular Road.

"Is Madame all right?" he asked her. He went across the floor and round the screen. She followed him with her hand on her breast.

"I was just after powdering her," she said. "I was on the chair by the bed there, listening to the plane, and I jumped sky high, I can tell you. I thought the house was hit."

"She looks just about the same," said Michael. "She's tucked in so tight, I don't think the shocks even moved her."

"Oh, she wasn't stirred," said Madame Hamel. "Thank God, it wasn't this house they fell on! There's no harm done, Mr. M'Clane. The only thing is—that pottery head of a baby asleep that did be on the mantelpiece—it was

"Brian" Madame would call it, and she forbid me to lift it to dust. Well, when I come out from the screen, there was the little head lying in bits on the floor. The explosions had it off the mantelpiece."

"It would be Brian they got," he said. "I think she was fonder of that sleeping child's head than anything she possessed, Madame."

"Was she? Well, isn't it a pity!" She put both her hands to her faintly coloured hair that clung to her head and down her neck in vague thin little rings.

"If you can spare me for a while," she said. "I'll be down to the kitchen to set right for the night."

"Good lord, yes! I don't expect you to give your little spare time to nursing her. I'm more than grateful for your help, Madame. There's no question of getting a nurse, Dyàn Dutt says. They got ninety men from the line at the hospital yesterday, he told me, after sixty-two the day before." He did not say, "Even if I could pay for a nurse."

"Well, I'll be up with you at ten again, Mr. M'Clane."

Something, as she said this, in her unexpectedly dark blue eyes, the only strong colour about her, caught his attention. Then his mind let it fall. He had enough in his mind already.

The screen, with the wall at the back and the other wall at right angles, made a little recess in which Moira's bed stood. When the proprietress had left him, he remained there, staring down at his wife's face. It lay turned on its side, on a small square of yellow waterproof sheet. The small glow from under the black silk shade was merciful to it. The face was the colour of the sand-coloured waterproof. Her hair had been cut short. Dyàn

Dutt had cut it. It looked like a tousled boy's hair against the bed's pillow, which was stood up and tied to the head-rail of the bed. "She may move and strike her head on the iron," Dyàn Dutt had said, as he tied the pillow. But she had not moved. Her lips hung apart. A long, thick dribble clung to the mouth's lower corner. Michael took a cotton wool swab from the carton on the small table by the head of the bed and wiped the dribble away. He dropped the swab into the bowl of carbolic solution. With two other pieces of cotton wool, he wiped her nose and swabbed over the waterproof sheet. He noticed a roughening of the skin on the chin and the upper lip. Some flakes of white mortar had fallen among the tufts of her hair. He brushed them off with his hand, and looked up at the ceiling above her head. "Must do something about that," he said.

He stood, hearing her shallow, sighing breaths. It did not seem that she had ever worn a blue frock and tied up her golden, shoulder-long curls with a blue velvet band. Suppose while he stood there, the purple veined eyelids lifted, and she looked at him!

"Moirà!" he said loudly. Then he felt afraid. He went out of the screened recess, passing the chimney piece over the blank gas fire, and his foot struck something. It was a fragment of terra cotta. It was Brian's ear. He picked it up and held it, thinking, "Poor Brian! Her Brian's been killed."

The table where he wrote was placed just beyond the screen, a little space from the foot of her bed. The ink bottle had been thrown on the floor, by the explosions, and ink weltered on the carpet. Michael tried to mop it with his blotting paper. A sheet of paper also lay on the

floor. He picked it up and in a wondering way he stood staring at it. "Chapter 111" it was headed. His expression changed. It became scrutiny. His lips hardened into a thin line. It was the schoolmaster examining the pupil's blotted, incompetent exercise. There was a sneer in the eyes, and satisfaction in the cruelty of detached condemnation. He would scarcely have recognized that face if he had caught sight of it in the dressing-table glass. Madame Hamel would have had quite a shock at it.

He crumpled the page in a ball, and dropped it on the floor.

"Very well then," he said loftily, "I must show you, I see. Now come on fool, get down to it! Make *something* of it." There was a pencil on the table.

"To drift in the old boat," he wrote, "on the lake at Dunbeg, on a limpid summer afternoon, was to let talk die of itself, as when—" He paused and sat searching for the simile he wanted. "Damn that plane round again! Could I write in my gloves, I wonder?" His hands were stiff with cold. In the silence of the cloudy, raw night, the sound of the plane's engine altered. It sounded as though it were running down; it had stopped. There was a thin moaning whistling that lasted for seconds while he sat. "Lord, it'll be a crash!" With a sound like a shot fired in the room, the light went out.

THE SIXTH AND SEVENTH DAYS

At seven in the morning Michael came downstairs, carrying Madame's string shopping bag and a list she had made out on the back of a bill for two rabbits. He had done this since it had occurred to him that he could do the morning shopping for her in return for her sharing the night watching and nursing of Moira. They watched in shifts of four hours each. Madame had been taken aback when he offered to help her in this way. It seemed that she was not accustomed to offers of help. Then she had hesitated, and then she had smiled her diffident smile and had thanked him.

Madame's writing on the list was pale and immature, with strong patches where she had licked the pencil. He had noticed her hands. They were long, with a long thumb and fingers which were swollen with chilblains. But they were clean. They smelt of scrubbing soap and the lanoline which, she told him smiling modestly, she rubbed into her hands after washing, to keep the softness of their skin. So Moira wouldn't mind them touching her. "She'd rather they touched her than mine!" he said to himself.

Passing the open door of Francis Harte's ground-floor room, he saw Harte crooked over his desk, his fingers pushing up his hair. A news sheet was spread in front of him. He was still in his overcoat and muffler, he must have just come in.

Michael would gladly have passed that room quickly. The sight of the uncouth man in there made him uneasy.

He shrank from the intense glance turned on him; and all the time, the humble, wistful admiration he felt for Harte made him stay by the door and hope to speak to him.

Francis Harte had an aggrieved, retaliatory, thrust-out Irish face. He thrust out in all directions, thrust out words like the protective quills of a porcupine, or like the fireworks in a Catherine Wheel. He whirled round himself a palisade of boisterousness, of geniality with a sting in it, of derision, or of choler. Inside the palisade, there was, Michael believed—not a prince in a palace, but a hermit's cell, in which a hermit sat perfectly quiet. But he had never seen a glimpse of the hermit, and had no idea how to get through the palisade to him.

Harte looked up. His eyes had not either the remoteness, or the kindling seriousness connected with poets. They were like small black tethered goats.

"It's great to see you this morning, M'Clane, it's great! I wish I'd known, when you first arrived, who you were, but I didn't connect you with that M'Clane at all, at all. I never understood you were married."

"I didn't know who you were either," said Michael. Delighted, he grasped his opportunity, swinging the string bag. "I'd like to say the excitement it was to me to meet the author of *The Spectral Beauty*. I read the poems while I was ill, and I thought them better than anything I'd seen for years. I hope they were noticed."

"Ah, not much noticed. It's a long time since the last of them was written—four years, it must be." He jabbed the newspaper with the pencil he held. "You read me in the *New Challenge*?" he asked, showing his teeth in a grin. His teeth were strong, overcrowded and discoloured.

Michael had recognised the wretched printing on the dark, flimsy sheet.

"I have," he said.

"What do you think of them? Not much by your own standards are they? I've spoken to chaps, refugees, who'd seen the *Challenge*. Jumpy work getting out an illegal sheet, wasn't it? I'd like to have seen a copy."

"To be candid," said Michael, "I like your poems better. I'm sorry AE wasn't alive for them. He'd not have missed *The Spectral Beauty*."

"Have you noticed our paper's name," said Francis, jabbing with the pencil. "The *New Challenge*, carrying on the work of the old. The *New Challenge* is not illegal here, of course—not yet, that is. Of course, future events may make it so. That's happened in other places, and it may happen here. All it can do to stiffen resistance in this town and show the disaster of any compromise, M'Clane, this paper's doing." He convulsed his features instead of wiping his nose. "I'm here lecturing on English Literature, at the Institute, did you know? When the translation of *The Ultimatum* appeared, you should have seen the young fellows eat and drink it! I was as hot as them myself. You were the first Englishman to write as a practical revolutionary against the régime. (They wouldn't appreciate, of course, your being an Irishman.) You've seen the number of refugees there are here. It was some of them founded the Society of the Ultimates. Our watchword is the passage in Chapter XII of *The Ultimatum*, where you talk of the fight against tyranny. '*Tyranny begins in the individual*'—you know the part. '*Don't think you can come to terms with it in yourself ever and live*' and so on. It's too soon yet to talk of the world régime you hint at

in *The Ultimatum*. But that ideal which, as you put it, 'obsolete tyranny' is the ideal of the Ultimates."

He worried his ear with his forefinger and stared unwinking at Michael.

"The boys here last night are members," he said. "We're not all students. I want you to meet the whole Society, and the committee, of course. You're the honorary president of the committee, M'Clane, do you know? Now when are you going to write something for us?" His grin was suddenly boyish. He smoothed the paper with care and some pride.

In the street outside the window, a rough wind swept leaves of white paper along the cobblestones. The papers skidded about, sometimes they got up and danced in the air and came down to be whirled along the gutter. "The fellow last night dropped those on us," said Francis.

The women beginning to straggle from doors on their way to the shops mostly stopped to pick up the papers, but it was too cold to stand reading them.

"I'd like to," Michael began slowly. "I'd like to write something for you, Harte. But I don't know that, just how I'm placed at the moment, I'd have the time."

The poet looked at him and winked.

"Shall I tell you now," he said, "I didn't believe you when you told me you were busy in that room up there writing a story book. What do you take me for, M'Clane? If it's any secret work you're doing, you can trust the Society."

Michael, standing slapping the string bag against his leg, had forgotten it. He felt a longing temptation to explain himself to the poet, his contemporary, whose work he so much admired. Such a longing for a confidante—he had

not known it throughout the past six years. Why, he might be nineteen again, pouring his heart out to a fellow-student at Trinity, and that was just how he felt. Time which had swerved him through a dark, blind tunnel had landed him back at where he started. But he was not nineteen, he was thirty-two. Oh, if the world had held back for him!

"I suppose," he said wistfully to Francis, "you never heard of the first book I published. *Lenore*, it was called."

"Never heard of it," the poet said.

"It was a novel. I wrote it when I was twenty-four, while I was on holiday here in this town on a fifty pounds prize I won for a story. I'd tried with four novels before it. I'd tried my hand at a lot of ways of earning my living. People were saying it was time I made up my mind what to be at. But I knew what I meant to do."

"To be a novelist," the poet snorted. "Every reporter has that idea some time."

"I wasn't a reporter then. As a matter of fact I'd just stopped pretending to try at being an M.P.'s secretary. The public didn't take much notice of *Lenore*, nor the Press, except for a few men. It was the last thing I wrote, except as a journalist, for six years, until now. Perhaps you won't understand, but I felt a sort of compulsion to come back here, to where *Lenore* was written—as if it would be lucky—"

"To write a masterpiece?" the poet sneered.

"No. It's extraordinary, Harte, how I feel I've come to myself—after six years while I seemed to be someone else. I mean literally, coming back to being myself. What I'm writing is like speaking the first reasoned words after delirium."

"Delirium!" the poet exclaimed.

They stared at each other. "Damn!" thought Michael. "Delirium" wasn't exactly what he meant. It made Francis' eyes squint with outraged incredulity. The poet, thrusting his head forward from his desk, rasped, "Why did you come here, M'Clane?"

"To write *Amiel*."

"When war was declared you were in England, you told us. And you skip to a neutral country to write a story!"

"Why should I explain to him?" Michael thought. The poet waited forbiddingly. A drop at the end of his nose hung ignored.

"I never told you I was in England when war was declared, Harte. I came back to England and finished revising *The Ultimatum*. Three weeks after it was finished and contracted for, my wife and I left England. That was a month before war was declared. I was feeling rotten. We went to Lausanne and I went straight on my back with a nervous breakdown. I was in bed for months. When I could stand up, we came here."

"You didn't go back to England," said Francis. "You weren't strong enough maybe! You're strong enough to write your story book, it seems."

"That's what my wife said," said Michael. He was disconcerted when he found he had said it, and he laughed foolishly.

The poet was not disconcerted.

"The author of *The Ultimatum*!" he said. "Do you know, when I knew who you were, I said to the boys, 'He's here on secret business.' Wouldn't you have been strong enough to stand by your pen in England, if you couldn't carry a rifle? Wouldn't there be work you could be doing?"

A ponderous figure came swaying down the stairs above them. She wore a pale pink wadded satin dressing-gown. Her metallic brown hair was in steel crimpers.

"I shall make a fuss," she said to the two young men. "Rancid butter with my early tea again; and you may say what you like, I don't see that we have to put up with *that* yet."

"I hope not, Miss Jardine," said Michael. He was suddenly conscious of the string bag dangling against his legs. She looked at him.

"I forgot to ask you, how's your wife this morning?"

"About the same," said Michael.

"Will she recover?" she asked.

"I don't know."

The ponderous figure swayed on past them down to the passage to the stairs leading to the basement kitchen.

"You've got a book there, Harte," said Michael quickly. "I saw it last night. Graves' *Irish Poetry*. Could you lend it to me? There's a poem of Mangan's in it I've been trying to remember."

"For the masterpiece?" the poet gibed. Reaching out to his littered shelves, he jerked out the book, in its badly grimed and faded paper cover. He flicked the pages familiarly.

*"Through some dark wood" [he mouthed], "'mid bones of
monsters, Hugh now strays.*

*As he confronts the storm with anguished heart but manly
brow—*

*Oh, what a sword-wound to that tender heart of his were now
A backward glance at peaceful days"*

*"But other thoughts are his—thoughts that can still inspire
With joy and onward-bounding hopes the bosom of MacNee—"*

Michael couldn't help continuing. "It's not that one. Do you know that one of his, Harte, *Siberia*? '*In Siberia's wastes, The ice-wind's breath*—' I can't for the life of me, remember the way it goes on."

"When I read Mangan as a boy," said Francis, "I always used to see a purple thunder-cloud edged with lightning. Here, take it, what the devil do I want with it?" He threw the green book at Michael.

"The story of what we're going through—told as a narrative if you prefer it—that would have been something! A fine enough swansong, that would have been, for Michael M'Clane. We might have arranged for readings of it to the Society—most of them understand English. We'd have printed extracts in the *New Challenge*. But if it isn't this town in the war, and if it isn't the war, and if it's not a residue from *The Ultimatum*, what is to make the shindy about, tell me!"

"It's hopeless," Michael thought. Nevertheless, his yearning dream of discussing *Amiel* with Harte persisted. So he began, although he was hampered by the poet's unblinking stare.

"It's the study, from his childhood, of a fellow—"

"Who'll read it?" the poet rudely interrupted him. "I suppose you're writing it to be read, and you've certainly chosen a merry time for it. Will it make 'em laugh?"

"Why should it?"

"Will it lift us up? Show us the silver lining? You needn't sneer."

"I'm not sneering."

"And it's not topical?"

"No, it's not. It begins in his early childhood. It—"

The poet laughed inimically:

"This child of yours is ill-starred, M'Clane. Unless you're wanting a miscarriage, consider sanely whether the wisest thing you could do for both of you wouldn't be to dump the embryo into Madame's kitchen stove."

"But you know," said Michael in a low voice, "I've thought of doing that."

"Well, if they break through us in the north, you may as well drop it down the closet, for all a publisher will ever see of it. Is it nearly done?"

"The first part's done. I'm in the early chapters of Part II. I suppose if I wasn't a fool I'd tear it up, Harte."

"Don't go! I've looked forward to a talk with you, M'Clane." A peasant ancestor spoke in the blarneying tone spread over a leer. "Do you know, I feel sorry for you. It's a big misfortune for yourself you weren't writing this story book a couple of years ago. It's a misfortune you ever left off writing stories. It's a harmless occupation. The enemy mightn't hold it against you. If stories were all you'd written in the last six years, you'd be a prisoner of war, no more, no less, if they got in here. If they get in here and they come calling on you, will you tell them that *The Ultimatum* was your delirium, M'Clane?"

"I shouldn't have used the word, Harte. You've not understood me. It's not that I've gone back on it—out of fear, or for any other reason you can think up about me—"

"Oh, no. It's simply that you want to be left in peace to write the study of a fellow! Well, tell 'em that! I don't suppose they'll kill you. You know more about where they'll put you than I do. Where's this bit in *The Ultimatum* where you call your witnesses and take their evidence?" Tormented fury lay in his small, hot eyes as he turned the

pages of the yellow book. Then suddenly, snapping it shut, he laid it carefully on his desk. After a switch of his nose to remove the drop, his face became affable and business-like. His father had perhaps kept the important store in an Irish country town. If he had, this might have been his face when he dealt with the travellers. "We've talked nonsense enough," it seemed to say. "Now let's come to an understanding."

"Then you'll write something for us, M'Clane. In English or not, just as you please. You've seen the paper's articles are in all languages to show our international character." He had been up all night in the second-hand book basement which housed the printing works of the *New Challenge*. "I'm going to get three hours' sleep," he said, staring through the window at some men passing down the street with spades on their shoulders. Girls were with them, and children carrying trowels. "You've talked to me about my poems, M'Clane," he said suddenly. "Right. I'll talk to you as the author of *The Spectral Beauty*; and I'll tell you I'm flooded up with common human reality, the way you run stale water out of a fountain and flood in the fresh. Every corner of me is filled with it. It doesn't come to me through filters any more now. I get it raw. I'm bare to it, and I'd not change back—d'you get me? Why the hell should I have a wrapping? I claim the right to suffer with my kind as they suffer. I'll bleed with them! Talk to me of poetry after that!" He writhed, searching his pockets for a cigarette, cursing, "Damn, damn, damn them, where are they?"

"How unhappy he is," thought Michael, "and how he loathes his kind!"

It was a wild March morning. The little square, with

the shops Madame dealt with, was only a street away, but his legs were failing before he had waited in half the shops for the small quantities they would give him. Women were turning away from the counters, and he turned away with them. There were no eggs. He couldn't think what to buy instead of them.

He went back with his bag through the park. Down against the bare, clean earth of the beds, some dim Spring colours squatted, safe from the wind tearing over them. Branches tossing with the wind were showing tight, dark buds. On a stretch of grass, where the snow had lain a week ago, they were trying to dig the new trench shelters. He spotted the novices, hitting feverishly at the hardened ground. Workmen and old men, who might have been gardeners, went at it more steadily. But they had to stop too and rest on their spades, looking at the still frozen earth.

Oh, time, time! It was the most precious gift given to mortals, and he had taken his gift and used it blindly, never seeing to the end of it.

He put each foot down with care. He had to think what he was doing for he could never be sure how his feet would behave when they got his weight. One, two, one, two! A steady stride was still beyond him. But for the first time since his illness his legs felt like his own legs wrapped in cotton wool, rather than like the cotton wool stilts he had been trying to manage with.

The emergence of life in his limbs was like a symbol of the life beating in his mind, a strong prisoner in bonds. It beat at him to release it. "Wait, and I'll get you out!" he said. "Only wait!"

Oh, time, time!

He had to stop and rest on the seat by the pond. The grey water was whipped up into waves between the rafts of broken ice. All round the edges of the pond, the swans and black gulls were standing. Children always fed them with bread, but there was none to-day. The pallid, tired-looking young man, who had obviously been up for most of the night, the meagrely provisioned shopping bag which had yet grown too heavy for him—there was nothing in either to demand notice. Pallid and tired young men were to be seen often enough in the park. All the same, people as they passed the seat, stared at him, and as often as not they turned back to stare at him again. For the young man was smiling.

He got up and went on in the teeth of the wind with his gait of an old man. What a joke that was—just a silly pretence when, if he really tried to, he could fly! In his elation, he thought he would buy a little present for Madame, who was so kind. But as he visualised her, it was rather hard to think of something that would please, and not embarrass, her.

He paused by the large florist at the corner of the square. The cut flowers were far too expensive for him. In the end, he bought a little pot of early purple heather for her. The heather runs over the Dublin mountains. But he knew he had bought it because when he looked at it he saw the brooms they make of heather in Co. Cavan, to sweep the cottages.

Madame Hamel had dusted the room and filled Moira's hot-water bottles when he came up to his room. There had been no change, she said. When she took the pot of heather from him, a vivid, almost shocked colour

sprang up her face. She was so overwhelmed that he knew it was a long time since she had been given a present by a man, or perhaps by anyone.

She brought up his meals to him for he must not leave Moira. Her husband, Monsieur Achille, did the cooking. He was an extremely talented chef. Michael hardly recognised the things he brought home in the dishes Madame set by his elbow. If there was only more of them! Michael spent all day in his room. He wrote even while he ate, at his table beyond the foot of the bed where Moira lay.

In the early mornings he left the house to join the queues outside the shops. The string bag grew lighter. No barges carrying supplies were able to get down the river to the quays. Hurrying back as best he could through the park, he did not now notice the beds or the buds. He was too concentrated. Snow had fallen again, and rain after it. His feet dragged through half-frozen slush on the cobblestones. Those readings to the Society that Francis had mentioned—how his heart had leaped at the thought of them! The readings might have been in Harte's room, in the evenings, with the hearthrug nailed across the window and shutting out the dark.

On the sixth night, before he lay down, Madame sitting in the chair beside Moira's bed, and sewing hospital swabs for Dyàn Dutt, he told her about the heather brooms in the Co. Cavan, he had known as a child. He had not been there for twenty years. His later youth had been spent in Dublin, London and in half the countries of Europe, including Russia.

"Russia? Have you been there, Mr. M'Clane?"

"I was in Leningrad, and in Moscow. I even got to Ekaterinburg in Siberia, where the Czar and Czarina were prisoners."

"You've had a great life of it," she said.

But he remembered Co. Cavan better, on the whole, than other places he had seen, and the cottages in the bogs, like dwarfs' houses beside their mountainous winter cocks of turf-sods.

It was that night that she asked him to call her Christina. She asked it with an effort, but with no assumption of intimacy. She flushed, but then she was making a request, and that always called for her courage. Even Mr. Harte's pushing in and pulling out the nails for his black-out, she had let go on for days before she brought herself to the point of saying a word.

"Isn't it a lonesome thing, Mr. M'Clane, when nobody calls you by your name any more? My husband says 'Christine'—sure he has all kinds of names for me," she smiled apologetically. "It's such a pretty name, mine is. I've often thought to myself, 'If I could hear it again just now and then, while I'm still in this world!'"

"And you haven't many pretty things left," he thought. It did not seem to him remarkable that she asked him.

The electric power station was in ruins. Householders were rationed with candles. A night-light in its saucer burned dimly all the night by Moira's bed. Its flickering half veiled her face with shadows, and often in his night's work he put down his pen and went to her, not to swab her lips, but because he thought her face had moved.

CHAPTER III

To drift in the old boat on the lake at Dunbeg, on a limpid summer afternoon, was to let talk slowly die of itself, as when two are falling asleep together.

The surrounding trees stood back motionless, impregnated with sunlight. All about the lake, the vividly green, mounting growth stood checked, as it were, in its semi-tropical thriving, for an hour of siesta in the sun.

Molly held the oars. She shipped them presently. For some time she had not been rowing.

Her husband lay on cushions in the bottom of the boat with his head on her knees.

The boat was an old one. Molly had made out the name painted in faded black letters on the paintless timbers, *Ursula*. Ursula was the name of Molly's mother, and Ursula, perhaps, had drifted in this boat on this lake with her lover who was soon to be her husband, and was soon to be dead with her. "She stayed at Dunbeg House with father," Molly said, "when they were engaged." How long ago that was! So Molly's mind was drawn back to the past, and she saw her life, all the years of it, leading up to this hour of her tranced energy, while the light and the water moved, and fish in the lake rose to snap at the flies dancing. She shook a drop of water from her finger down on her husband's monumental forehead and, bending over him, she whispered, "Are you happy?"

It occurred to her that her life had not been happy. "There were a lot of dark places," she thought seriously.

She trailed her left hand over the boat's side. The platinum ring glinted up at her through the water. It fitted her finger too firmly to slide off. She splashed another drop on his forehead, and murmured to him, "Are you asleep?"

He was not asleep. He lay relaxed, his eyelids half covering the pupils of his eyes behind his dark glasses, in a temporary suspension of all voluntary activity of his mind and body. His mouth wore a lax smile. He had not moved for an hour. Molly was in a tingle of life. She could not rest from wonder at her situation. She was married. This was her husband.

She drew her wet hand across his hair. The release of tenderness in her was a wonder to her. Her action in caressing a head, all the very trifles and commonplaces of love, were for her the trying of wings. It was not that she sought response from him. Her own caresses marvellously and privately intoxicated her.

What a moment to think of Gribby!

She said, "If I hadn't known what it was to be utterly wretched, Amiel, I don't believe I should be able to be so happy now."

"Were you wretched?" he asked, turning his head on her knee.

A moorhen went swimming by in the darker water at the lake's edge. Molly watched it. "Yes," she said. "Part of my life has been very unhappy. I'm glad of it. It's made me able to understand better when someone else is unhappy, when nobody near them understands. Shall I tell you about it? I've never told anyone. It wasn't

really Uncle's fault. The woman, Miss Gribbling—he couldn't have known when he engaged her as my governess—but she wasn't sane. I see that now, of course. Isn't it awful, Amiel, how a child, in the most impressionable years of its life, may be at the utter mercy of someone warped! You see, years ago some woman called Molly had spoilt Gribby's life for her. I didn't know how. She never told me. It was things she used to say. 'Ah, another Molly, are you?' were the first words she said to me after I told her my name. I was about six. 'Another Molly, are you? You can't trust them.' When she smacked me with her hairbrush, she always said, 'If Molly had been slapped like *this*, she wouldn't have been a wicked girl and broken people's hearts!'

"For eight years, Amiel, that woman vented her hate for someone else on me in every way a grown-up can think of, to make a child's life a nightmare to it. I often wonder, if I hadn't been called Molly, would she have been quite ordinary to me? And, in that case, would I have been quite different?

"Half of Uncle's house in Derbyshire was shut up, and Gribby and I and Orange, who was the housekeeper, and a cook, lived in the other half. Uncle was travelling.

"I was a little fiend in those days, Amiel. Friends of Uncle's came to see us, but I always behaved so atrociously that I think they felt sorry for Gribby. They wouldn't let their children come to tea with me, and I don't wonder.

"Gribby seemed sometimes to feel that she was punishing me in advance for dreadful things I might do when I grew up. Sometimes I really think she managed to believe that I was the Molly who'd done—whatever

it was, to her. I used to wonder if Gribby could have been *her* governess, too, and if she'd stayed on perhaps after Molly grew up, and then the thing, whatever it was, happened. But I only guessed. Gribby never even really said, in so many words, that there had been that Molly. She just went on hating me. I remember one thing—you'll laugh at this, Amiel! There was a chocolate cake the cook made that I simply loved. When it came up for tea, Gribby used to say, 'Go down on your knees and ask me to pray for you, and you shall have some!' I never would, so the cake was locked away in the cupboard. I pretended I didn't want any. Two days running, Gribby left the key in the cupboard. She was sure I'd creep back and try to steal some. I knew she thought that, and I'd have died of hunger before I turned that key. I remember one night dear old Orange came up to me in bed with a big slice of the cake on a plate. I'd never realized she saw much of what was going on. You know Orange, how stiff and prim she is! I can't even now tell in the least what she thinks of my being married. Did you speak, darling?"

But it seemed he had said nothing. She laughed, and said, "I believe Orange doesn't think we really are married! Do you remember her face at the Registrars?"

"Orange hates me," his drawl came. The boat was being pushed gently towards the bank, by which they had come down from the house. Molly laughed again and went on telling him. "I was so furious at her knowing I was longing for it that I said, 'How dare you steal cake from the dining-room! Take it away, or I'll write to Uncle you're a thief.' Of course, I wouldn't have. Anyhow I never wrote anything important to Uncle. I

hardly knew him, you see. Besides Gribby always read my letters to him. Orange gave me her sternest glare and stalked out of my room. After that, she left me quite severely alone.

"What happened was that I began to play up to Gribby's delusion. I accepted that there was some sort of fore-ordained, mystic reason for our hating each other and I was determined she wouldn't win the feud between us.

"When she raved at me, I worked myself at once into a worse temper than hers. I swore at her till she implored me to stop. Of course the more she implored the louder I raged. I was fourteen by then and fairly tall and strong, and I saw I could make her nervous of me. I even pretended sometimes that I really was the other Molly—not saying much, you know, but just enough. I don't think she knew how much she'd let me guess, and her eyes would go quite wide and staring.

"Towards the end, she was really frightened of me, and how I despised her then! Much more than I'd ever hated her. I began to find I could do anything I liked, no one in the house dared to stop me. I lay in bed all day if I wanted to. I climbed trees in my party frock. I did lessons just when I liked. I was more of a tyrant in the house than Gribby had ever been. Poor Orange and the cook were quite nervous of me, too. They all were, and I used to laugh to myself at them. I was a horrible little girl. But all the time I was so lonely it used to make me cry with rage. I never had a friend. I used to read a tremendous lot though. But it was worse when Uncle came home. All I thought when he came was, 'Here's someone new I'll have to fight!' I was managing

Gribby beautifully by that time, but I knew perfectly well what they'd all three of them be telling him about me. I was sure he'd send me to a reformatory and I meant to run away. Poor old Orange was so disgusted with me that she pretended to be getting deaf when I talked to her. Still it was Orange who had a talk with Uncle, the second night he was home, and I always knew it. She'd never written to him because he was travelling all the time. She mightn't have been able to write it, anyhow. But one morning after he came, when I got up, Gribby was gone. I've often wondered where she went. I've always seen I had to avoid mentioning even her name to Uncle. The day she went, he came to see me in the schoolroom with some Oriental things he'd brought home for me. They were lovely, but I didn't quite trust him and while I was watching him to find out just where we stood, I saw he was crying. It's so awful to see a man cry. I didn't know what to do. I felt horribly ashamed for him, without understanding a bit, of course. I just pretended not to have seen, and presently he went out.

"People advised him to send me to school. I ran away from the first one and I was expelled from two others. The girls looked on me as a kind of savage, and I despised them as silly sheep, poor things. Amiel, I'm finding it so easy to tell you all this. And I can't imagine even wanting to tell it to a single person I know, and how bored they'd be if I tried! I want you to know the wife you've got.

"Of course the truth was, I simply wasn't fit to mix with girls my own age. In the junior common-room at

Stream Hall, that was the second school, they were always round the fire in the evenings, talking about the holidays and what they did at home. Or they played games. I sat by myself with a book. I didn't know about any of the things they were talking about. I didn't know any games and I wasn't going to ask to be taught. If they asked about my home, I was rude to them. I didn't really despise them by that time, I only told myself I did.

"There was one girl at that school, Marion Horne, whom I was friends with and after I was expelled, for getting in a rage and scaring Fräulein out of her wits, Marion invited me to spend Christmas with her family. There was a party on Christmas Eve." Here Molly hesitated. Her tendency was to rush her fences. But she had begun. She wished him to know this. It was important that he should hear it. She looked down at his face and at the relaxed smile of voluptuous enjoyment of the warmth and of his own inertness. He had not spoken since she began to tell him. "Am I tiring you?" she asked, disappointed.

He shook his head. "Will he see it?" she thought. "Will he think of that passage outside the ballroom door at the Hestons?"

"Amiel," she said, "I shall always remember that evening when I came downstairs, dressed, to go into the drawing-room. I heard their voices in there. They were all the school age—about sixteen to eighteen. I suddenly knew my dress was all wrong. Uncle had told Orange to buy it for me. I didn't know how to dance. I could never talk to them as they talked to each other. They wouldn't

want to talk to me. I stood outside that door simply not able to move to go in. People wouldn't understand what I went through, standing there. I think it was in that moment I made up my mind I'd change myself. I'd allow nothing that had happened to stand in the way of my meeting the world from then onward on equal terms. I don't suppose I put it in so many words to myself, but that's what I was determined on. I didn't want really to change my *innermost* self, if you can understand me, and become absolutely like one of them. But their pity made me savage."

The sun had dipped behind the trees at their back and left the boat in green shadow. Molly plucked off the glasses that hid his eyes because she hated them. She grew absorbed in the straight nose, the short upper lip, deeply dented, the soft mouth and the rounded chin. He lay with his eyes closed, the long lashes touching his cheeks. His mouth was a little open. He was sunk in languor and in the quiet and the soft cushions. His heavy passiveness was neither serene nor reflective. He had been so ill.

She touched one of his eyelids and they lifted.

"Darling," she said, and she had never called anyone this. She could not begin to utter it casually, "I'm wondering about you. Won't you tell me?"

"Say that again!"

"Say what?"

He did not immediately answer.

"Darling," she said. A faint breeze rustled the leafage on the bank. She drew a corner of the rug over his chest. "I don't want you to be cold. It's your turn now, Amiel. Won't you tell me?"

He put his right hand over hers on the rug and held it tightly.

"Perhaps," he whispered.

"Were you born in Russia?"

He looked startled and bemused. His clasp of her hand relaxed, though he still held it.

"It's time I knew about my husband," said Molly. "You know all about your wife."

"You asked me something. What did you ask me?"

"If you were born in Russia."

After a long pause he said formally, as though he were giving the facts for official purposes—"for his naturalisation," she thought with amused impatience—"I was born in Russia, on the fifteenth of December, 1881." The unearthing of these dates seemed to surprise him. His lips moved as he repeated them to himself. "The fifteenth of December—"

"In St. Petersburg?"

"No. In Orel. My father's country estates were there."

"But your mother wasn't Russian?" she said.

He played with her fingers, holding them before his face.

"Lovely fingernails!" he stroked his fingers over her rosy, polished nails. Molly laughed. "She had fingernails like yours," he said.

"She? Who?" said Molly.

"She was not a Russian. She was the daughter of Professor Gilchrist of Edinburgh University. He was my grandfather. He was giving a course of lectures at the University in Petersburg when she met my father, and they were married."

"Then what was your father's name?"

"He was General Radovsky—Lyov Pavelovitch."

"Then why are you called by your mother's name, Amiel?"

"Well, Katya wished it," he said uncertainly. "I'm going to be naturalised, you know, don't you?"

"Who's Katya?"

"My step-sister. My mother was my father's second wife. He had two sons and a daughter by his first wife. They didn't like my mother. Their grandfather had also married a foreigner, far below his station. She was a German singer. I think she was the daughter of the conductor at the Opera house in Leipsic. I remember her. She was quite an old woman. She wore all her jewellery in the mornings. My father had a very good voice, too."

"And were you happy then?" She prodded, as he fell silent, "Are you looking at something?" She could never be quite sure of his eyes' focus. This, she believed, helped to give them the air of eyes which had been injured. His pupils were rather unusually dilated, but the iris was also very large and it had a smudged look.

"I shall tell you something," he said slowly, "I had a little carriage made in a child's size. My father had it made for me by a Frenchman. It was all gilt and ebony. The miniature of some famous royal carriage. And there were two tiny white ponies with black and gold harness. I used to drive myself about in our park."

"How Russian!" she exclaimed. But she could not conceal her astonishment at this account of his childhood. It was not at all what she had expected. "It sounds like a fairy tale."

"But it's true," he said dreamily. "I had that carriage. Do you not believe it?"

Molly laughed. "Darling! It was only that I'd imagined you had a different sort of upbringing. Not quite so luxurious."

"My mother," he went on in the same, half-slumbrous way, "hated the carriage and the ponies. She told me they cost too much. She was very angry with my father. When I was seven, she took me to live with my grandfather in Edinburgh. We were there till grandfather died."

"How old were you then?"

She saw slight dents of mental concentration above his eyebrows.

"Twenty," he said.

"Did you go to the University?"

"Yes." He smiled, playing with her fingers.

"Were you happy?"

It was as though he savoured his memories, too indolent to give them out.

"Yes," he at last simply answered her. "But I don't think I learned much. I liked mathematics."

She had moored the boat. They climbed slowly up the shallow rise through the trees. The spongy ground they walked on was a carpet of moss. Moss upholstered the tree-trunks and covered fallen logs and stones as though with velvet. The place was a green velvet drawing-room, with sofas, cushions and footstools. No jaggedness protruded that was not rounded and muted by velvet. The sunlight entered with a muted translucence. Little birds dashed across and across through the sunrays, and Molly stood in her husband's arms.

She whispered to him, "This has been the most perfect day."

She spoke again the magic word that gave them both so much pleasure. "Darling, I understand why you haven't wanted to talk of your work to-day. One day you'll talk of it to me and you'll make me understand it. But it's outside us now."

She put into his hands that night, before they went downstairs to dinner, her precious little embossed copy of the Portuguese *Sonnets*. She felt that she was placing her heart there.

When they came up to bed, she saw him pushing and pulling the sashes of their bedroom windows. Molly was shocked. She always slept with her windows thrown wide open. She would not even have the curtains drawn.

"And on a summer night! How can you, Amiel!"

"How can you?" he retorted, pulling.

"If you shut those windows, I shall get out of this bed, Amiel—I shan't sleep here. I never heard of anything so unhealthy. We should be stifled."

On the flyleaf of the Portuguese *Sonnets*, she had written in her firm, bold hand:

*The face of all the world is changed, I think,
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul
Move still, oh still, beside me as they stole
Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink
Of obvious death, where I, who thought to sink,
Was caught up into love, and taught the whole
Of life in a new rhythm.*

CHAPTER IV

*A voice by the Cedar tree
In the meadow under the hall—*

Molly sang at the Bechstein in the drawing-room:

*"Singing of men that in battle array,
Ready in heart and ready in hand,
March with banner and bugle and fife
To the death, for their native land."*

She wore a muslin dress of dark blue flowers on a paler blue ground, and a wide blue sash. A blue velvet ribbon was round her forehead and disappeared into the gleaming little cushion of hair at the back of her head. She sang in a clear, high voice, which had been excellently trained to give pleasure:

*"Maud, in the light of her youth and her grace,
Singing of Death, and of Honour that cannot die."*

Her husband wandered about the long, polished floor, peering into the glass-fronted cabinets which were full of beautiful things. They were too full. It was the same all over the house. Every drawer in every room was packed to overflowing, as often as not with things quite incongruous to the room, although the furniture in the rooms was sparse.

Between each cabinet in the drawing-room there stood a gilt chair with a brocade seat. A massive, antique glass chandelier hung from the centre of the ceiling, dully

sparkling in the twilight of a northern Ireland soaking August afternoon. It had rained since morning.

Molly did not overestimate her voice and her playing. She knew the music they fitted and the music that was too large for them, and not for worlds would she have attempted the too-large music, for she appreciated and revered it too sincerely. The song she was singing from Somervell's setting of Tennyson's *Maud*, fitted her voice to perfection. It had been listened to with pleasure in drawing-rooms. It was natural that she should have preferred her husband to listen, and that his restive mouching about the room, trying which of the cabinet doors opened, should put a slight edge on her voice:

*"Till I well could weep for a time so
sordid and mean
And myself so languid and base."*

He came and leaned on the piano and, disregarding her hands, he struck middle C, D, E, F, with the head of a Sévres cherub he had taken from a cabinet.

"Amiel! Put that down!" she was alarmed and a little irritated.

He came behind her and put his arm round her, laying his cheek on the top of her head. She tilted her head back. There was a question in all his caresses. "Yes, you may touch!" she was sometimes tempted to say, laughing.

"Molly!" he exclaimed. "We're married! I'm married to you."

"Yes, you Russian bear, but is that an excuse for spoiling this lovely song I was singing to you, hoping you'd appreciate it? I don't believe there's a note of music in you. And they say Russians are alive with it."

"I used to play the piano," he said, his lips moving against her hair.

"Before you went to Siberia?"

He nodded, and, over her shoulder, he struck again with the cherub's head C, D, E, F.

"Amiel, for goodness sake, put that down. You'll smash it."

He threw the cherub carelessly on a chair standing against the wall. It rolled off the brocade seat and on to the floor. Molly sprang from the piano stool and flew to it. Angry from the shock, she found the open cabinet and set the cherub, uninjured, back on its shelf.

"How could you do that, Amiel? A piece like that would be irreplaceable. Haven't you any appreciation of precious things? I've noticed that about you—you don't care."

He stammered an apology. His face looked bewildered by her outburst. But as she stood up from stooping for the sheets of music which she had knocked off the piano in her hurry, she glimpsed something that just slid across his face, and that was not bewilderment. It seemed a stealthy derision.

Molly stood by one of the long windows draped with heavy brocade curtains, and flanked by wooden shutters. The flowers in the two wide herbaceous borders were grown to unnatural proportions in half-tropical conditions of moist earth and mild air. They showed their colours dulled through the wet haze. There was the flagged path between the borders, and at the end of it the stone Celtic cross on its pedestal which was graven with steps on the four sides. It stood like a solitary memorial to the dead, its short arms outstretched against

the dark trees. Hidden by that dark line of trees was the velvet upholstered drawing-room and the lake. Molly stared out at the cross. She had made no intimate girl friends who might have told her that on a honeymoon, one can want very much to be alone. If they had told her, she would have smiled tolerantly to herself. She was healthy and vigorous, used to an active life. She would have loved to explore the countryside with him, but a suggestion of physical exertion filled with him with aversion. For a fortnight the lake and the garden, and the hay meadow beyond the high wall of the kitchen garden, had been their world, and they were alone in it. The servants hovered retiringly, and watched and gossiped. Molly had found joy and excitement. She had been also a little amazed, a little perplexed. It did not suit her to feel either.

She turned briskly from the window.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm going to get into something sensible, and then I'm going for a tramp to stretch my legs till its time to dress. The rain's stopping."

"I'll come with you."

"You?" He was standing over beside the huge mantelpiece of green Connemara marble. The smell of the smoking sods of turf drifted from under it, a peasant smell, a smell of cottages in the handsome, treasure-cluttered room. "I don't think you're up to it, darling. And I need the exercise to keep me nice tempered."

"I should like to come with you, unless you wish to be alone."

She hesitated. "I shall walk rather fast."

"Oh."

She went over and put her arms round him. "It will be fun going together," she whispered.

Then she ran upstairs and came down very soon in a green tweed coat and skirt and gum boots. She had taken the blue velvet ribbon and all the pins out of her hair. It fell to her shoulders in its loose, shining curls.

"No one will see us, Amiel, and I love rain water on my hair."

He stared at her in amazed delight. He did not speak. Molly took his arm, calling the two spaniels, and they set off down the long avenue between the grazing field and the trees that bordered the lake.

"We're a married couple on our honeymoon," he said, "and we're going for a walk together."

The road lay over country of a deep, brilliant green. It must, Molly said, be the most fertile soil in the world. But few crops were raised that they could see. A few small, damp haycocks in a field were eyemarks on the lush green which stretched, barren as a waste, vivid as the flush on a consumptive's cheek. It was rotten with damp. Ascending a rise in the road, they looked down on a lake with a little island. North on the horizon, grey shapes of mountains were cowed in mist and cloud.

Molly was disappointed in the scenery which had not the wild grandeur she expected. It was small hills and dips, moist and enervating under the heavy sky.

"I'd imagined it more mountainous, Amiel, and altogether more beautiful. I've heard that parts of Cavan are beautiful."

"I hate very beautiful places."

The words surprised her less than the considered decision of his tone.

"I don't believe you," she laughed. "You might hate *one* perhaps."

"No. They're all the same. They make me—" he paused, finding the right word.

"They make you feel insignificant, do you mean, Amiel? That's not—"

"No. They make me feel sick."

"Why?"

He glanced at her from under his lashes and made no answer. His eyes rested on the greenness with idle pleasure.

Molly walked with a swift, rhythmic step, enjoying the wind which left a film of moisture on her face. Her keen eyes probed all they passed. She heard his hard breathing and saw his face white and damp with sweat. She dropped to a slow walk, holding his arm.

"Im so sorry, darling! You ought to rest, before we start back for home."

They were on a road laid through bog and bordered with rushes. The rich dark pools lipped the road's edge. Nothing could be lonelier. The bog stretched wide, east and west, to the skyline. Out on the western bog a solitary and dwarfish white thatched cottage cowered humbly against the stack of cut turf sods built higher and wider than itself, its protection both from the cold and from the sweeping winds of winter. A beaten track of firm ground led from the road to the cottage.

"They might let us rest there," said Molly. "Did you ever see such a place, Amiel? Think of the poverty that makes *that* a place for humans to live in."

"Why think of it? You wouldn't go in there, would you, Molly? I can walk home without a rest in there."

"Have you any money, darling? Half-a-crown would do. I daresay it would seem like a pound to these poor creatures."

"I loathe poor people!"

She looked at him. Staring at the cottage, his face wore a heavy, yet nervous obstinacy. He gave himself a shrug and wriggle, as if he sloughed off something, and he turned his back to the cottage and looked up the road.

"Come, darling," he said, drawing her hand through his arm.

The word from him, in his charming, soft voice, melted her. On the road, at the beginning of the trodden pass over the bog to the cottage, a grey donkey, as small as a calf, stood in the shaft of a cart. The cart, dusty with crumbs from turf sods, was empty. The donkey gazed at them mournfully.

"Poor little brute, he's hurt himself," said Molly. "That's dried blood between his eyes. He must have scratched himself against a tree. Only there isn't one near."

"He's been whipped," said Amiel.

"Not there, surely?" she protested. "Why, it just missed his eyes."

"They lean over from the cart to do it. I've seen it in Russia. He gets used to it on his back, he doesn't feel it if you hit him till you're tired. At least they say so. I rather doubt it myself."

Molly's breath caught.

"How horrible! Why they might blind him. How dare they do such a thing!"

"Molly! Where are you going?"

"I'm going to threaten to r-r-report them for cruelty. The man ought to be put in the shafts and thrashed on the f-forehead—"

Her face had gone white. Amiel did not know this stammering, blazing-eyed creature. He entreated her:

"Molly, please come! You can't interfere! They'll be furious."

"I can frighten them into not doing it again."

"Molly—"

"Let go my arm please, Amiel!"

"Then I shall go home."

She was passionately angry, and he saw it.

"He can't be *afraid*," she thought, looking at him. It was not the fear that she might make a fool of herself. She had seen that fear too often in faces, in her guardian's for instance, not to recognise it. "What is he afraid of?" They confronted each other, wordless, out of their separate states.

Molly pulled her arm from him. An impeccably self-possessed, angry young lady, she walked firmly along the pass, and rapped on the cottage door. The upper flap of the door was closed, as well as the lower, and no one answered her. After waiting, and even bending to glance through the window into the smoky interior, she was forced to conclude that the hovel was empty.

Amiel had moved slowly a little distance along the road and he stood still, waiting for her. He no longer looked afraid.

"It's just as well they were away," he remarked carefully, as she came up with him. "You would only have made them angry. Those rough people are very easily roused, and they can be unpleasant."

She was silent.

The rain had drawn off, dissolved in warm clammy air, but the sky impended low above them and bulged with rain like a milch cow's udders. They had left the bog behind, and the little green fields which adjoined, almost merged, with it. The road ran above a lake cradled in barren green which thrust short thin fingers into the water. Amiel, without a word, caught her hand and pulled her at a run down the slope to the level of the lake.

Surprise completely scattered her. Then, breathless with laughter, she broke away from him. She heard him pursuing, and she ran faster. Amiel might as well try to catch an antelope. He gave up. Groups of red fungi grew near the water's edge. He gathered these and flung them after the slim, flying figure. She threw them back. The two spaniels bounded and barked about them in a frenzy. There was a battle of the fungi, with screams of laughter and triumph, and the yapping of the dogs, all on the dank grass under the cloud sprawling and pressing down more heavily and holding in the storm.

"Oh, Amiel, what possessed you? *What* would anyone think who saw us? Two mad creatures."

Her cheeks shone scarlet. The hem of her skirt caked with mud, and with the wet dirt running off her hands, she was caught into his arms. He kissed and kissed her lips and her damp, hanging hair, to which distilled drops of moisture clung.

"Oh, you're mine now!" he breathed.

They had hardly calmed themselves at dinner. The wildness by the lake lingered with them in a suppressed excitement which made their sentences fragmentary, in-

clined to end in giggles. The old butler and the parlour maid, Finnegan, handing the courses, both smiled in sympathy with the bubbles breaking from this under-current of mirth between the couple.

The little morning-room was their snug refuge from the wet and wind. The wooden shutters were drawn, and the turf sods were blazing.

They found some packs of cards in a drawer of the Queen Anne tallboy, along with folded lace and damask tablecloths and lengths of velvet and a photograph album.

"Not cards!" he said.

So they rummaged in another drawer, and Amiel routed out an old picture puzzle of the Taj Mahal, and they put this together, although important pieces were missing.

She heard his amused laugh and she looked at him in wonder. He laughed a wide, wholehearted, boyish laugh, throwing his head back. Some colour was in his face. He looked very young, younger than Tony Kitteredge, than whom he was so many years older, when he was happy.

But she remarked how his right hand alone fitted the puzzle. Had his right hand only thrown the red fungi? "No, surely, or I'd have noticed it."

This persistent keeping his deformity out of her sight, she had determined to do away with. To-morrow, perhaps, she would lead up to it. "This evening is too happy to risk spoiling."

His fingers were clumsy with the pieces. The rather short, thick fingers constantly overestimated their capacity for delicate fitting and adjusting. When first he broke the thin neck of a piece, trying to fit it, he laughed his wide schoolboy laugh. But the third time he swore, and

with baffled perplexity he gazed at his fingers which he spread in the air before him.

He stood at the window when she was in bed, and slowly pulled the cord which drew open the thick, faded chintz curtains, smelling of dust.

"Don't you want them closed to-night?" she asked him.

She allowed him the closed curtains, so long as the windows were left open.

"No," he answered from the window. "You're right. It's dark and there's a cold wind; but it's summer."

The bed was an immense mahogany four-poster, a century old. He laid his head on her breast, and she drew him into her arms. She was woken by hearing him cry out. It was hours later. The wind had gone down, and bright moonlight shone in on them. He was leaning up on his elbow beside her.

"Darling!" She touched him. "Are you awake, Amiel?"

"The donkey," he muttered.

She was terrified and horrified. She had never seen such a thing. He had collapsed on his face, and the shocking crying went on. She held him in her arms. She could do nothing else. It was too strong for both of them—the crowding, dumb sobbing, and the undryable tears.

CHAPTER V

"Who is that gentleman, Connolly?"

"Him coming on along the path by the currants is it? 'Tis Dr. O'Reilly, Ma'am, the master's doctor. He does come into the garden for vegetables or fruit, it might be once or twice in the week. Would you not have seen him?"

"A doctor?" said Molly. "When you've given him the vegetables, Connolly, ask him to go up to the house. Tell him Mrs. Gilchrist would like to see him."

"Is Mr. Gilchrist not himself this morning, Ma'am?" the old man asked with irrepressible interest.

"Oh, it's nothing serious. He seems a little feverish, I think. He got wet out walking yesterday. But if a doctor's here, he might as well come up and take a look at him."

"The master swears by Dr. O'Reilly," said Connolly, "but if fever is in it a nettle grown on a grave and touched on the forehead will draw it out, Ma'am. Will Mr. Gilchrist be a Catholic or a Protestant now?"

Molly had never been ill since she had measles when she was five. She felt the exaggerated alarm and anxiety of one who has had nothing to do with illness.

She picked the dish full of raspberries for Amiel, after which she would have sent the pony and trap for a doctor, if she had not seen Dr. O'Reilly come into the kitchen garden.

In half an hour she heard his heavy feet on the stairs

from Amiel's room. She opened the door of the morning-room where she was waiting for him. The doctor was a big, pale, soft Southern Irishman with a sunk voice that seemed to come from a distance. It was a voice without emphasis, and after he had said a thing, he always smiled or gave an intimate look that was like a wink, and seemed to hint at a sly insincerity in the words used. But he was the most simple of men, and it was only his way of adding the emphasis his voice lacked.

Molly asked him at once, "Is anything serious wrong with my husband, Dr. O'Reilly?"

"Augh, no! Nothing serious in the world. A little bit of a chill, that's all there is to it. Keep him in bed for a day or two. I'll drop in this evening with a bit of a prescription I'll make up to have down the temperature, and he'll not worry you, Mrs. Gilchrist."

He looked at her with a pleasure he did not attempt to conceal. She was to him a rare visitant from a world as fabulous and alluring as Tirna'n-oge. A *Tatler* was given to him each week by an old patient. He read it all, but the society gossip he enjoyed with the pure delight of a child reading a fairy tale. He would have liked to ask Mrs. Gilchrist was the Russian Ballet such a great affair, and if you'd see many electric broughams in London with all the motors there were now.

"I recognised your husband," he said, "from a picture in the *Tatler* some weeks ago, Mrs. Gilchrist. Siberia—now that's a spot I wouldn't care to spend my time in. I remember I read in a book this long while since about huts up there in the Arctic that have sheets of ice as panes in the windows. I asked your husband was that so. He said he's seen them."

Flannery entered with the whiskey decanter and a jug of water. This was evidently a customary procedure when the doctor paid a morning visit. He had a glass and a half, refusing Molly's tentative offer of a second glass.

"It's never pressed on me, Mrs. Gilchrist. The drink is my stumbling block, I'd better tell you at the start."

She accompanied him into the hall where he got into his coat. The rolled up *Tatler* stuck out of one of its side pockets and a cucumber out of the other.

"Then Dr. O'Reilly, there really is nothing to worry me about my husband?"

"Nothing in this little bit of indisposition. Keep him warm, that's all. There seems a general debility—I'm talking without an intensive examination, mind. He's telling me he was very bad this five or six months back. Sure you can see he's pulled down. But you'll do wonders for him, Mrs. Gilchrist. You will."

He gave her a final survey. She was extremely beautiful he thought, but also he wanted to be able to tell his young daughter the clothes she had on her.

"I understand from your husband you're on honeymoon. Cullenstown is a queer place to choose for a honeymoon. I went to Brighton for my own. Very gay it was. I often remember it now I'm a widower."

It seemed to her that Amiel need not have told him this. He sensed her slight stiffening and he said hastily, "You needn't fear I'd mention you to a soul in the place, Mrs. Gilchrist. Sure you'll not be wanting company a while yet."

She gave him her hand with a smile that dazzled him: "Goodbye, Dr. O'Reilly, and thank you."

"Goodbye to you." He was going out at the door beyond which, on the gravel sweep, his trap waited, stocked up with apples, early pears, peas, and heads of lettuce from the garden. It looked more like a fruiterer's cart than a doctor's trap.

And Molly ran upstairs to Amiel.

She opened the door, but he did not hear her.

He lay propped up in the great bed, his face turned away from her and from the light of the two windows. Molly had once visited an old groom of her uncle's in the incurable ward of a London Hospital. The impression of the beds and their occupants had for a long time troubled her healthy, but seldom entirely unhaunted, mind. What had shocked her was not their sickness. It was the sameness of attitude of men who had lain for a long emptiness of time, like old useless tools lying mouldering on a shelf. It was the long idleness of their hands and eyes, progressed beyond resignation and become habit. The old and younger men had not lifted their eyes when she entered the ward walking so swiftly. It was as if they had not heard. Only when she spoke to the Sister, those in the nearest beds looked up, and then they had given her their slow smiles.

"He is thinking," she had frequently thought, looking at her husband. "His mind must often be far away on some aspect of his work, and then he is naturally in an apathy to everything round him." But as she stood in the doorway, and looked at her husband when he was quite unconscious of her, it seemed that all the fortnight's troubling amazements and perplexities were focussed in the attitude of his body as he lay there, neither asleep nor awake, his eyes turned from the light,

sunk in a lethargy so thick that he did not hear her come in.

She said loudly, "Amiel!"

Not at once, but after some moments, he slowly turned his head, without lifting it from the pillows. When he saw her, a gradual smile broke over his face. He felt a faint regret when she came quickly over to the bed. He would have liked her to stand for a long time in the doorway so that he could look at her. She sat on the bed beside him and laid her hand on his forehead.

"Raspberries!" he exclaimed. "Are they for me?"

"For who else? I picked them myself in the garden, all wet from the rain yesterday."

"The garden—of course, yes. These are not wild."

"Where would you get wild ones this size, silly?"

She fed him, dropping the raspberries into his mouth.

"I've seen them growing wild in the woods," he said, "much bigger than these."

"Where was that?" But she asked it abstractedly. Her nature was strenuously against the thing hidden, the thing buried out of sight by fear. If she buried a thing, it was deliberately and after she had held it to the light and measured it. She reft aside fogs of misunderstanding, as a surgeon cuts away the flesh to a wound. She was a natural fighter in the open. She could employ camouflage when it was necessary, but she despised the need for it. "To go on as if nothing has happened," would be to her the last humiliating surrender. Perhaps, in the last analysis, it would be impossible to her.

"Do you know, Amiel, you're looking better since this morning. Dr. O'Reilly says it's just a little feverish chill, and you'll be quite well again in a day or two."

"Oh, what's 'quite well'? I only know mine, I've forgotten what it is to be yours."

The impatience, so strange in him, stabbed her. She took his right hand which lay on the counterpane and stroked it. "I'll make you well," she said. "Still I'm glad we had the doctor. He was rather nice, didn't you think, darling?"

"He didn't tell you I'm going to die, did he?"

"Amiel!"

Then her arm was round his shoulders, and he smelt her delicious perfume, and she said, "Tell me!"

He turned his face so that it lay against the full, gathered sleeve of her blue dress.

"I've known for so long that there's something. Don't bar me from helping you! It's what I want to do most in the world."

He began to tremble. He raised his eyes, and they stared wildly at her.

"Molly!" he cried out. "I don't understand. Why are you like this to me?"

"At first I believed it was the effect of coming back after those years of loneliness in the North. Now I know it's not only that. I know it's not the effect of your illness. Amiel, I'm your wife."

"My mother always said to me, 'Don't marry a Russian,' " he said suddenly, with a small laugh.

"Is it something—I'm sure, almost sure it is—something that happened on the Kolymsk expedition?"

"Molly—would you bring me a drink of water?" he asked.

She went to the washstand and poured some water from the croft into a glass. He sipped a little water and

gave the glass back to her. When she sat down he took her hand and drew her arm under his head. His face in the childish position was very flushed. It occurred to her that he might perhaps be feeling too ill to have been pressed to speak.

"Amiel, darling," she said, "if you're tired, it might be better if you tried to go to sleep. I'll stay with you."

"No. Let me tell you. It was not at Kolymensk. I was never near there."

"You were never in the Kolymensk Mountains! What do you mean?"

He opened his eyes sharply.

"Are you joking, Amiel?"

"Joking?" Then he went on. "It was in the summer." And he stopped. "She was so very small," he said in a voice she scarcely could hear. "She—"

"I don't understand," she said quietly. "The lectures."

"And that summer—"

"The lectures, Amiel!"

He moved restlessly, "The first of the lectures was out of a book the little boy read to me. Malcolm, you know. *The Young Arctic Adventurers*. It was about two boys in the Kolymensk Mountains. But it was only a story. You couldn't get into those mountains through the forests. No one but a madman would want to. Verkhoyt must be hundreds of miles to the east of them."

"Verkhoyt!" she repeated.

"It was in the summer," he began.

"The Kitteredges—they didn't know."

"It's no use to ask me," he despairingly pleaded with her, "what Katya and Mihail—he's her husband, you know—said to the Kitteredges about me. Perhaps Katya

told me—I can't remember. Lady Kitteredge asked me if it was true I was an explorer, and I said yes. I said yes all the time, because I didn't remember all that Katya told me that she and Mihail had told the Kitteredges. I think now it may have been only the research they said about."

"Then you never were in the Arctic at all!"

"Yes, I was. Why do you say that? I was two years in Nertchinsk, and seven years—seven years in Verkhoyt. Yes. Seven years."

"Verkhoyt," she repeated again. "What was that?"

"A convict settlement. Very, very far north. In the Yeneisisk. And in summer there—"

"I don't believe it. You're joking!"

His head still lay on her arm. He began to cough.

"Will you give me some more water?" His hand shook so violently when she gave him the glass, that she took it from him and held it to his lips. "What are you doing, Amiel?" Was he trying to sing? She couldn't distinguish a word. It must be Russian that he was singing. His voice was husky and tuneless from his cold.

"Stop making that noise!" she said. "I think you've gone mad. You're trying to tell me that you're a convict."

He stopped singing.

"No," he said. "That isn't what I'm telling you."

"Then what were you doing in a convict settlement if you weren't sentenced?"

"Yes," he said, "I was sentenced. I was twenty-one. I've just remembered it was on my birthday." Now why did he remember that?

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She tried to draw away the arm under his head, but

with his one hot hand, he clung to it. "If you would say nothing for a little while," he pleaded, "I think I could tell you about her."

"Was that why you changed your name?"

He gazed baffled into her lovely blue eyes. They were large and edged with curving, long black lashes, and they looked shining bright with terror.

"Answer me—was that why you changed your name?"

"Yes," he said dully. "They told me I should take my mother's name."

"They? Who?"

"Katya and Rodya and Arkasha—my step-sister and brothers, and their families. That was in Bordighera before we went to Cannes." His fingers one by one relaxed on her arm and she drew it away. It felt cramped and stiff where his head had lain.

"Why couldn't you have told me? That's what I can't understand." Her voice roughened, making his nerves jump. "Were you afraid?"

His head throbbed with pain. If she would only pull the curtains across the windows! But he did not ask her because he hoped that she might think him sunk into a doze, and that she would go away. Presently she went, taking with her the empty raspberry dish which looked unsightly in a bedroom.

Amiel lay alone while the hours passed. Sometimes he slept. He was not really delirious, but he woke burning with thirst, and then he tried to sing in his dry, painful voice:

*"Kolya spent three roubles,
It should have been but half!"*

Yossudar! Yossudar should come now and give him a drink.

Kolya kept me waiting—

He opened his eyes, and saw a woman standing at the foot of the bed. He was not really delirious. He did not guess the stabbing terrors she overcame to have her question answered, but he knew what the question was, she would not go away and leave him to sleep until she had the answer to it.

He dragged his voice up—it made a groan because he was so tired—and he spoke out very loudly:

“It was for playing the piano to a room full of workmen.”

“Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“All right. I wish you’d give me some water.”

She brought the glass, laying a hand which was horribly cold on his shoulder through the heavy silk of his pyjamas.

“Then your fingers weren’t bitten by wolves, were they?”

“No. Frostbite.”

“Couldn’t you have said that, at least?”

He lay breathing a little heavily, with his eyes closed.

She sat down by the bed. Presently she began to draw her fingers rhythmically across his forehead. Its dry heat startled her.

She sat in the old-fashioned bedroom among its cumbersome furniture, and here the old aunt, “the Mistress”

had sat, through such bright, pale, watery summer afternoons, playing a hand of rummy with "the Master," a fractious old invalid in bed with one of his rheumatic attacks, and thinking of the plums to be preserved before dinner.

And Molly's thoughts too were as simple as those with which any wife might watch her husband asleep and with a temperature. She was hoping that her husband was not going to be very ill.

THE SEVENTH NIGHT

Michael ceased reading and flung the sheets of the chapter down with such force that they scattered over the floor.

The proprietress had listened, sitting very upright on the hard chair by the sickbed, with her hands folded in her lap, exactly as she sat in chapel which was the only place where she ever heard anything read. His action scandalised her, somewhat as though the priest should, with a similar oath, hurl the missal over the lectern. Michael couldn't help laughing at her expression. The astonishment passed from it, but her face remained grave and even severe.

"Mr. M'Clane, now what in the world would you do that for?" she said.

"I felt like it," he explained.

She accepted this. Men did things because they felt like it. Cornelius Fluddery, her first husband, would bring the poker down on a tray of crockery when the rage took him. She got up and stooped, picking up the scattered pages, much as on those occasions in the old days of her first marriage, she had picked up the fragments of crockery. Rooms must be kept decent, and that was her business, little good as she was at it. She was never one to enjoy cleaning and tidying for their own sakes. Painting furniture in bright colours to make rooms look pretty, or making shell flowers for the mantelpiece—that was

what she would have enjoyed, if there had ever been time for it. She smoothed and laid the neat pile of sheets down on the table. Michael grabbed the last sheet, containing the end of the chapter and crumpled it into a ball in his hands.

"Now what are you doing to spoil that one, Mr. M'Clane?"

"That Master and Mistress and the plums—Gosh what a sentence!" Squeezing the ball, he hurled it, with sour zest, as far as he could across the room. It fell at the feet of a yellowish young man who had knocked so discreetly it had been unnoticed, and so he had proceeded to open the door. This was Dyàn Dutt, a student in his last year at the medical college. His face was more yellow than brown from want of sleep. He had been at the hospital from one in the morning and it was now nearing midnight. He had little need to speak English in the town, but he carried a notebook in his pocket in which he noted down the English idioms he learned at the cinema which he regarded as a great cultural educator. In his spare time he learned by heart the idioms he had noted down. But he had no spare time now.

"I will see Mrs. M'Clane," he said softly to Michael. Everyone spoke softly in the sickroom, "before I strike the hay. There is no difference?"

"There's no change—no."

Michael brought the candle from the writing-table, and held it over the bed. Dyàn Dutt shivered in his neat, readymade suit. "It's cold in here, gosh."

"She has two hotwater bottles," said Michael, "and the two quilts, and there's a pair of my knitted stockings on her feet."

Christina stood up to unhook the temperature and respirator chart from its nail over the bedside table.

Dyàn Dutt stood over Moira and raised both her eyelids. Michael, in the now familiar routine of examination, alternately shone and shaded the candle flame before the unchanging pupils. He noticed the Indian's fine hands as, abstracting Moira's right arm from under the clothes, Dyàn Dutt raised it and let it fall. Her arm in its sleeve of her rose pink angora jumper fell nerveless, like a dead woman's. Dyàn Dutt next tried for the knee reflexes, afterwards testing the heart. He studied the pulse and temperature charts Christina showed him.

"There can't no doc be spared from the hospital," he said, "to take over this case. But that is O.K. I take care of it bully."

"There's no change?" said Michael.

"You've said it. No change. Keep her warm. That counts for the most urgent. Keep clean the trap."

"The trap? Oh! I see."

"Rub all the time for bedsores. They show up not yet?"

"No."

Dyàn Dutt took the basket of bandages Christina had washed and rolled for him to take back to the hospital.

Michael followed him across the room to the door.

"Can't you tell me, Dyàn Dutt—will she die?"

"Oh, boy, I spill the beans if I savvy. Cross my heart. The concussion is deep to hell. But they has lain doggo, concussed—you get me—ninety days and they has showed a kick and they recover." His eyes were closed with fatigue.

"You'd better get some sleep, Dyàn Dutt. And thank you. It's good of you to stand by us."

"Nerts! You hear the lowdown? We rush them back in the North."

Michael stared at him.

"What have you heard, Dyàn Dutt? Is that authenticated?"

"Is it happened? I tell you what I hear. You hear it in the late news. I am gosh all in. I beg you excuse." His words were swallowed in a huge yawn.

"I don't believe it," Michael thought. He went slowly back to the red screen. Christina was bending over the bed, smoothing and tucking in the blankets disarranged by the examination. Her face was composed and subdued. No, she could not have heard the rumour. Michael glanced at his watch. It was ten past eleven.

They stood together looking down at his wife in the stronger light of the candle. Moira's lips and chin showed a covering of tiny flaking scales. "We keep swabbing," said Michael, looking at these, "and it doesn't seem to do any good."

"There was one day," said Christina in her too plaintive and placatory voice. It was like a voice which for years has soothed children and spoken to superiors, saying meaningless things, while the inward thoughts are deep away, until all real expression has faded out of it. "There was one day, these three weeks since—when you were first come here—shocking rain there was that day. And I see Mrs. M'Clane come in from the street in the green coat and skirt she'd be wearing, and she'd no hat on her. And the rain and wind between them had made such a wildness of her hair, you'd think of gold thread tangled on the counters at Christmas time. 'Here's a sight I am, Madame,' says she to me, 'but don't you know rain

water's the best tonic for the hair,' says she. What you read about the lady on her honeymoon going to walk in the wet reminded me of Mrs. M'Clane then."

"Perhaps I saw her that afternoon, too," he said. "That rainy afternoon or another."

"Then it's true!" she triumphed with the ghost of animation at her successful guess. "Is that what they'll do, Mr. M'Clane? They'll take a person they know well, and put the wrong name on them, and then they copy them down into the books, do they? Would you not be aggravated to see yourself copied in a book?"

"Would I recognise myself? You don't always."

"But the hair, and playing the piano, and the blue ribbon! Well, I've been wondering. All along while you've been reading, I've said to myself, 'Now I know who she reminds me of.' I couldn't tell you just why, but that's what I thought." She glanced over at him, deprecating and gratified, hoping for commendation of her perspicacity. "But 1912—why, she'd not have been born then!"

"No. Nor is she a society belle with six thousand a year. Christina, aren't you freezing to death with your arms bare? I can give you a sweater."

A faint colour spread in her cheeks, but the dimness hid it. He could see that the suggestion embarrassed her, made her bridle and give a little wriggle in her chair. She was almost coy.

"No, thank you, Mr. M'Clane. I'm warm enough." By way of recovering herself, she said quickly. "Wouldn't you lie down in your own bed? You're in need of the sleep."

"Soon I will."

Michael went to his bed. Its flimsy quilt was on Moira, but, with an effort, he stripped off the two top blankets. One was grey with a red stripe in it. Coming behind the screen again, he threw this one over to Christina, and, with a shy half smile, and her eyes cast down, she awkwardly settled it round her hips and legs. He pulled forward the chair of the writing table and wrapped himself in the other blanket. "If I had a cigarette," he thought. "But she should have been," he said to Christina. "A society belle—you won't understand, but I see her in that lovely, unreal period. Doesn't that time seem to you like a dream world, too good to have ever been true? She would have fitted it perfectly. She'd have worn corsets, and she'd have sung *Maud* besides Schumann, but otherwise she'd have been just what she is now."

Christina pondered, her red hands clasped on her knees. "Then all the rest of it," she said—she was disappointed, "the guardian, and the governess—she was a terror to be let take care of a child, wasn't she Mr. M'Clane?—and the chocolate cake—that's all lies, is it? I mean that's all a story too, is it?"

"No," he said. "That was her childhood. She told me about it. About the cake, too. It was at a sort of strictly private school, only four or five girls and that lunatic female at the head of it, while her parents were in the East. She was the terror of that establishment by the time they came home on furlough and took her away."

"Then she'd recognise it, herself. You said they don't."

"Do you think there's less dribbling when her head's on the other side?"

"I think it's the same both sides, sir."

He blew out the candle, so as not to waste it. From

where he sat at the foot of the bed, Moira's face was now no more than a pale blur on the pillow. He looked away from it.

"I think," said Christina, "she was the most beautiful lady I ever seen in my life. But I think you make her sound brighter in herself than what she was."

"The first time I ever saw her," said Michael, "was seven years ago at a studio party in Chelsea. It was given by the two chaps who shared it. I remember their paintings hanging all over the walls. The paintings were frightfully bad. I couldn't think what she was doing there. She looked so clean. Her hair was beautifully done, you know what her hair was. She was wearing a lovely dress. It was some very pale pink stuff with a shimmer, just barely pink. I remember looking round the party and thinking she was like a rose in a cactus bed."

Christina did not suggest again that he should go to bed. It was her four hours shift of night nursing, but he had worked too long. His brain was whirling round like a wheel off the ground. As for Christina, she had noticed how, after a long stretch of writing, he would be full of talk. Yet she might talk to him when he was writing, or even when he sat with the pen in his hand, staring at nothing, or drawing pictures on the paper, and she got a brief answer from him, though it would not be a rough one. He would be worried and impatient, even fretful, but he was never rude.

They sat, she at the head, and he at the foot of the bed, dimly visible to each other in the night light's glimmer in this hushed alcove, shut off by the screen which was like the bulkhead of a ship's cabin, from the

black darkness of the room and from the house remote beneath them.

He had never known the street below the window to be so quiet. There were no footsteps on the freezing slush, no voices whistling and quarrelling, and calling, "Goodnight, don't forget to-morrow!" It used to go on all night.

"Did you want to marry her that evening?" the incentive whisper reached him in the wrapping silence. But it was at Moira that Christina stole her propitiatory, apologetic glance.

"She asked me if I rode. We talked horses until she left the party, and she'd invited me to spend the next week-end at her family's house in Dorset. After she was gone I couldn't believe she could have meant it—she hardly knew my name. I even asked some of them there who knew her if they thought she'd been serious, but they said she often did that. 'Darling Moira,' they called her; I think they really were fond of her. She was so sweet to them all, they couldn't help it. 'Darling Moira' had her own conventions, they said.

"Her father and mother are dear old things—Malay forestry; retired. There was a young week-end party in the house, all types, earnest, sporting, and the arts. She told me she thought it was good for them to be mixed together. They were all devoted to her and she was perfect with each of them. My first book had just been published. It was a very simple thing. *Lenore* it was called."

"Have you stopped telling, Mr. M'Clane?"

"What's that?"

"You stopped talking all on the sudden."

"I beg your pardon, Christina. I was thinking."

"About that book you said was your first, was it?"

"It's extraordinary to think of it, Christina. I don't suppose I shall ever be so happy as that again."

"Did she read it, sir?"

"I couldn't bring myself to give it to her. I'd listened to her praising the others, the rottenest of them, just the way she did with those two fellows' awful paintings. She said always the thing calculated to put them back safe on their little pedestals of conceit, as if she feared they might be wavering. She simply wrapped her compassion in a tissue of sweetness and fake interest and handed it to them. They lapped it up. But I knew if I heard that tone in her voice about *Lenore* I wouldn't be able to bear it. All the time of course I knew I was going to give it to her. I'd brought a copy down in my suitcase from London. It was the last of my complimentary copies I had left, the one I'd meant to keep for my own. It even had my name in it."

"It would be nice to get a book given you by the writer. Was the book a great success, Mr. M'Clane?"

The gentle eagerness in her voice, this anxiety to hear all he would tell, touched him painfully. He tried, by the feeble light, to catch her expression with a longing and doubtful gaze. When, for six years, had he felt such a longing? Yet he wasn't after all, quite the young man of twenty-four who had written *Lenore* in a welter of opening his heart to all who would listen. That young man had received so many sharp smacks right on his open heart that he had begun to try to keep it at least half-closed until he could be sure it was not going to be smacked. Now Michael could not make out this woman's

expression. She might rebuff him, but still he could not keep back his longing.

He stared again at Christina and wondered passingly what she might possibly mean by a book's being a great success. He supposed she would mean, had it made him a lot of money?

"I made two hundred and sixty pounds from *Lenore*," he said.

"Isn't that a surprising lot of money to make out of a book, Mr. M'Clane?"

"Christina, the book was a success. More of a success than I'd dreamed of for it. I gave her the copy, and she'd been dreading I'd give her one."

"She was afraid, was she?"

He was startled. "How do you know that?"

"Lest she might have to praise it, the way you say she praised them others—seeing the foolishness and praising it, for fear there'll be trouble else. Isn't that the way you'll be doing with a child, Mr. M'Clane, or with a simple one?"

He thought of Monsieur Achille, her husband. "So that's your life!" he thought transiently.

"Sure you knew how she felt towards you by that alone," she said.

"Because it mattered to her, you mean, that I shouldn't call for that make of pity from her. I hadn't shown up sparkingly in that little week-end party, Christina. When I saw myself beside some of her friends, not the artistic lot, but the others who I thought must be her real friends—when I saw myself beside her, for that matter, it made me pretty depressed. When I put *Lenore* into her hands I said to her, 'Here's the best of me. You've seen

only the stupid part. That's why I want you to read it.' ” But had he actually said that to her? More likely he had only longed to say it.

Christina slipped her hand under the bedclothes to test the warmth of the hotwater bottles laid at Moira's sides. “They grow cold that quickly.”

“Were you ever so frightfully happy, Christina, that you ran instead of walking?”

“When I was a child I'd do that,” she said, after thinking.

“Well, that was our honeymoon. We spent it, where do you think? We went to Russia—to Leningrad. You wouldn't think that was much of a place to spend a honeymoon in, would you? It was in midwinter. To us it was St. Petersburg. We were both wild to see it because of the books we both loved. We lived in Petersburg with Dostoevski and Turgenev. We forgot Leningrad as much as they'll let you. And on a snowy day, I remember—not actually snowing, but the sky was full of it—we were on one of the Nevsky bridges, looking back at the old Winter Palace, and I had the first germ of *Amiel*, and I told her about it. I was to write it when we got back to England. We hadn't any money. Her people haven't much, and there are two younger sisters. So, to begin with, I tried for a job on a paper and I landed one on the recommendation of a reviewer who'd puffed *Lenore*.”

There was a confused noise of voices in the street below. It was like shouting. It was a little eddy, a movement of life, in the utter quiet of the street. Michael did not get up and rush to the window to find out what was happening. On the contrary, he realised a strong aversion from doing this. Christina rose quietly and went and shut

the crack of open window, dulling the noise. She came back and sat down, wrapping the striped blanket round her knees again. The night-light's brave little flicker was doing its best at being both lamp and fire in this screened retreat shared by the three. The two took turns cupping their hands over the flame to warm them.

He said, "I asked her how she could expect me to sit writing *Amiel* in such a world as we were living in. She was such a fighter, I thought she'd understand that I found it impossible—I didn't *dare*—to shut it out, and shut myself in. And what do you think she said? She said, 'You're afraid to shut it out. That would take courage that you ought to have. You're taking the easy way, but don't pretend you're doing it because you want to fight and help.' Until that night we were like two people arm-in-arm walking the same road. She begged and begged me that night to stay in England and write *Amiel*. At least, to stay until *Amiel* was written. That was just over six years ago. I was cramming day and night to get hold of the language in four months well enough to be sent out by the paper. They knew my keenness, and six months later they sent me out as one of their two correspondents there. She came with me."

"Were you a newspaper reporter, then, Mr. M'Clane?"

"I was a special correspondent, it's pretty much the same thing."

"I thought a reporter was always a quick, tricky sort of a man, up to all dodges." She paused. She had not the boldness to say that she thought a reporter was a man who could take care of himself and his possessions. She said hesitatingly, "You don't seem just what I'd look for

a newspaper reporter to be. I'd expect them to have more of a hardness, if you understand what I mean."

"Would you, Christina? You don't know what I was in those six years. I hardly knew myself. But you can't change yourself so that it becomes automatic, and not so that it lasts either. I tried. I was a fairly good imitation, I think you'd have thought. But I wasn't the real thing. There were times when I slipped." He shivered, and dug his hands in his overcoat pockets under the blanket. "I was kicked off that paper for a slip. It got round that it was for telling the undiplomatic truth. I couldn't bear to have it known that it was for a piece of stupidity that any little damn slick junior reporter, who had his mind on his job and his eye on the clock, would have been above. After that I got on the staff of another paper which paid for hard facts and was hard up in consequence. We lived in some queer places then, I can tell you. Not that she minded poverty in itself."

"You must have seen terrible things there."

"That was the trouble," he said. "She couldn't stand it." When he looked back at the six years, and he did not care for looking back at them, he saw hardly any individuals, but only large groups of people, like a pageant on a stage—the persecuted, the imprisoned, the toilers, the refugees. There was a single figure, it was an old woman standing at a prison gate, holding a wide envelope in the wind that blew her grey hair, and tweaked her skirts. Moira had called a taxi and she had taken the old woman to her home with the envelope of grey dust of ashes. "She wouldn't see a bird in a cage too small for it, you know, without whirling into the shop like an avenging

angel. Some appalling scares she gave me. She never knew the beginning of fear. It was on her account as much as anything that I got the order to clear out of the country."

"What did she do, Mr. M'Clane?"

"She tried to help people."

"But you helped them," she said in her soothing tone which something in his voice, she thought, called for. "I'm hearing a bit from Mr. Harte. You didn't leave when they told you. There were dangers to your life then, and you stayed. Was she with you then?"

"No, she wasn't. She was played out. She'd seen too much. She was marked deep with it. I showed her my firm certainty that she'd run my head straight into the noose if nothing else did, and then she went home to England, to her people, as a personal favour to me. I wasn't long after her. Have you ever tried to work people up, Christina? It's too easy. Someone, worked up to it, nailed a copy of the *Challenge* on an official door, and two of our young fellows, munition workers, were taken and shot, and I escaped. After I got back safe to England, I wrote a book."

"A story book, was it?"

"No, a book of facts. A book on how to make over the world. I wrote it, night and day, in six weeks and directly it was done, we took all the money we had, and the advance on *The Ultimatum*, and we went to Switzerland. I was in a queer condition, dead tired, and yet mad with restlessness. I didn't want to stay still and think. Then at Lausanne I had this breakdown. I was in bed for months. At first I just lay on my back, too tired for anything. Even hearing that England was at war meant hardly anything to me. But when I felt more alive, long

days before I could walk, I began to think, and I saw she was right. I'd not gone into it to help anyone, and I'd not helped them. She'd risked herself and given solid help. She'd managed to save a woman and her son from arrest, and seen they got out of the country. And what had I done, in the last resort, but get two of them killed? I saw all I'd done and written in those six years as done in a sort of desperation, without understanding, while I was so brisk and efficient. I woke up in a torment of horror at the thought of writing another word that would mean death. Lord, I can't tell you my sick loathing for that game!"

The noise in the street had stopped.

"Have you ever heard of a book of poems called *The Spectral Beauty*, by Francis Harte, Christina?"

"That wouldn't be Mr. Harte on the ground floor?" She was greatly interested and surprised. "I'd never think he'd write poetry."

"He used to. They're very good poems. I read them while I was still in bed. The sight of a newspaper made me feel like retching."

Moira's loud breathing filled the silence. Listening to it, they thought it became louder and quicker, but that was always the way when they listened to it.

"Christina, I ask you," he said, appealing to her with a sort of hopeless wonder, "how could I have guessed that she believed I hadn't been sincere about coming here? That she thought it was an excuse not to go back to England because of the war. Of course, I never dreamed she could think that. I told her in Lausanne that I wanted to come to this place to write *Amiel*. I tried to explain to her why I wanted to write it here. You know, it seemed

to me that I was talking to her again, as if I'd come back to her after being away for ages. And then we came here, and I ate and slept, and when I wasn't working I dragged my rotten legs about the streets feeling disembodied; and yet, you know, being really alive as I'd never been once in those six years. And all the time *that* was what she was thinking!"

"Sure what use would you be to them back in England?" said Christina in her soothing voice. "You like a man half paralysed."

"She thought I was scared to stay there when the war was coming, and she thought I was legging it back there when the war seemed to be coming here. That was the very last thing she said to me, while we were standing on the pavement down there, and the next moment she stepped off the kerb, and the car was on her."

"She wouldn't blame you for getting out from the invasion, would she?" said Christina. "She was your wife and you her husband."

"It was on a par with all the things she blamed me for. She put courage next to God and cowardice below the devil, Christina. She despised me."

Christina thought of the lady lying there, of the soft, delicate body now familiar to her, of the dream-like night-gowns it was such a pleasure to handle and to wash. She supposed that Mr. M'Clane might naturally be despised by such a lady, whose feelings she, Christina, couldn't begin to grasp. It was possible that Mr. M'Clane, for all his cleverness, mightn't have succeeded in grasping them either. Christina's most urgent desire was to comfort him. She saw his eyes turn to the bed and she believed him thinking of the body which had walked so lightly and

which had run up the four flights of stairs like lightning, without pausing for breath. She said: "It mightn't have been so bad as what you fancy. We'll hope for the best and, God willing, she may be spared for you to come together again yet."

He was thinking of Moira's hair which Dyàn Dutt had cut off. It had been a beauty and now it was gone, leaving such poor little tufts that looked brown in the daylight instead of gold, with the life gone out of them; and he thought: "Our marriage is like that. It was my fault as well," he supposed.

"It's possible, Christina, that it's a mistake for two people with ideals to marry."

Christina did not venture to take this up, so she said nothing.

"Do you think, Christina, it's true that the artist, whatever he is, doesn't really demand an extra fineness in his wife? I mean that he finds it a relief to come *down* to her, not to have to keep up with her. Do you think that the most he really needs from her is to be loved and kept comfortable?"

"Isn't that all that a man needs?" said Christina uncomfortably.

"If she could just have come down sometimes!" She was too fine for him, and he thought of the small things that had eaten away their joy in each other until there was none of it left. "You see—for one thing—I wasn't her class," he added.

Christina could see that. A gentleman, as Mrs. M'Clane was a lady, would scarcely be talking to the proprietress, as he was talking. Or was he talking to her because she didn't count? She saw that, whatever his reason, he

couldn't help it. That was why she would not take his confidence as any personal tribute to herself. She could not allow herself to take it so, or she might feel obliged to abstain from listening. It would then be wrong, and a guilty act, with his wife lying there in the bed between them; as guilty as if she was to cease to address him formally as Mr. M'Clane. Her asking him to call her Christina was something different altogether. Even his wife would hardly object to it.

"My father was the vet at Cullenstown in Co. Cavan," he said. "Cullenstown isn't its real name. You've to be careful about putting a place's real name in a book or you get into trouble."

"Do you, Mr. M'Clane?"

"It's not safe. Any more than it's safe to call people by their names, even if you've put the setting back a generation. Not that poor old Doctor O'Gorman's alive to care a damn about my taking him. He drank himself dead, poor old chap. He was a pretty well known figure up there in Cullenstown when I was a boy." He smiled to himself unexpectedly, so that she looked inquiring. "Poor old O'Gorman's daughter Eamona—he and my father used to make jokes that she'd marry me. I used to be terrified when they said it. She was older than I was, but we went to school at the Convent together. She bossed everyone that came within a mile of her. Awful little terror when her nose was out of a book. I wonder what and where she's got to being now."

While he talked rather fast about the doctor and his daughter he, in his turn, had sent a sneaking glance of appeal at Moira. "Discussing us with the proprietress!" he could fancy her caked lips moved. She was no snob,

however certain things might grate on her—and yet she had made him feel on occasions that she was a snob. She might despise and reject him—alas, they had rejected each other!—but she would open her lips about him to no third person. She was never one to complain. She was too proud. “Yes, too proud,” he thought. “You can have too much pride, and then you let things pile up until they poison you. What’s absurd is to think that everyone ought to have the same pride.” But all the same, he sneaked the glance of appeal at her.

Christina did not see his discomfiture. The light was sepulchral, but she was not, in the brightest light, and for all her mistrust of them, very quick to see what people were really feeling.

“If you’ll excuse me, please,” she said, “and not take it that I’m meaning to be rude, Mr. M’Clane, I’ve wondered once or twice if you got on well together. If you’ll pardon me saying so, you’ve not written about her like a man that loved her.”

At once she was overwhelmed at her boldness. She stood up in confusion, unwinding the blanket, and said that if he wasn’t thinking of sleeping awhile yet, she should go downstairs and look for her husband.

“He disappeared on me after the supper was eaten, and it’s hiding in one of the bedrooms he’ll be, and jumping out at Mr. Harte or Mr. Neumann when they come in, if I don’t find him and get him put to bed.”

“Stay with me, don’t leave me alone, Christina! I’m too tired and I’m not tired enough. We won’t talk any more about me. Stay and tell me about yourself.”

“About myself, is it?”

The idea flustered her. She sat down again and care-

fully smoothed the front of her skirt with nervous hands. "Sure, there's not much to tell."

Her father had been killed in Dublin by a chance shot while crossing O'Connell's Bridge in 1920. He had left his family without support. So she had married, at sixteen, Cornelius Fluddery, a rich publican who smashed the crockery with a poker and beat his wife with a boot. He died early of a stroke and she had married Achille Hamel who was a waiter at the Gresham. Achille's aunt, a widow, had died and left him the guest house in her will. Two years after their marriage they were installed in it, making it pay very well before Achille had his accident.

"Had you children?"

"I had. One by each of them. Dan was a fine boy, he hadn't his father's temper."

Dan had been drowned five years ago when the trawler in which he sailed capsized in the North Sea. Marguerite had only been ten.

"There was typhoid fever here three years since, Mr. M'Clane, and it took her."

A year before Marguerite died, Achille had been knocked down by a car in the street, just as Moira had been. He had recovered, but he was never the same. He retained his talent for cooking, which had been the reason for much of the modest popularity of the house with a needy British, Irish, and American clientèle. He was as mischievous as a child and he always put on a dignified air when his wife scolded him. His sole legitimate recreation was making the wool rugs which adorned every room. He used unusual colour combinations and still more unusual patterns. The rug in Michael's room was white

with a black cross and, under the cross, a human foot done very neatly in red wool. He displayed great mathematical ingenuity in working out the designs, but if asked to explain the foot and the cross, or the Z done in yellow on a grey ground in Francis Harte's room, he put his fingers in his ears and sang loudly, regarding his questioner defiantly. It was always the same song, and the only one he was ever known to sing in English:

"If you're Irish, come into the parlour."

Michael heard this description of a recovery from concussion with a chill at his heart.

Achille's had been the managing brain of the establishment. Christina was neither methodical nor authoritative, and now the whole business rested on her. She failed to give the place the air Achille had given it, and they got a still needier class of guest. She could employ only one maid. Half the housework she did herself, and she had to run after Achille to get him at the cooking punctually and see that he wasn't in the bedrooms dressing up in the guests' clothes.

Michael listened to the recital with a certain angry humility, tinged by resentment. He recognised the simple facts of a hard life. He gazed beseechingly and painfully and hungrily at the spectacle of such simple human suffering. She had risen and she put up her hands to her pale, limp hair. He was awed by the spectacle and despairing because he might never rightly portray it.

"Well," she said, "since you can spare me for a short while, I ought to be looking for where my husband has got himself. I've to lock him into the bedroom, once he's in his bed, if I don't want him up here after me and

scratching at the door like he was last night." She added shyly, "Thank you for reading me your story, Mr. M'Clane. I enjoyed it very much."

He was taken aback by her simple assumption that he had read it for her enjoyment. He was struck, and regarded her with new attention.

"Do you read many books, Christina?"

"I read a book once," she said. "When's this it was? Oh, I can't have been above fifteen. *The Scarlet Letter* it was called. Did you read that one, Mr. M'Clane?"

"Is that the only one?"

"Sure I never had time to read another." She looked doubtfully at him, seeing a very thin, stoop shouldered young man with brown hair that needed cutting, and a pale, undistinguished face. His hair was not up in spikes like Mr. Harte's. It lay in lank, soft strands out of place. His large grey eyes were lighted and wide open, and they looked strained because he wrote so much and by candle-light. When his wife was awake, he had kept his appearance reasonably presentable, for she had demanded it from him. Besides he knew it was right. But lately he had been slipping. His overcoat was unbrushed and his trousers crumpled.

"If the lady," she could not help venturing, "if the lady in the story is *her*, the—the gentleman's not—he's not meant—"

"What's that?" Then he began to laugh until he saw he was covering her with confusion. "No, Amiel is himself, and I've not written myself in as anyone. I'll tell you this, Christina, I couldn't write myself deliberately if I tried. I don't know myself well enough. I know what I *think*; I don't know what I *am*. I've never taken time to

find out." But that was not true. "No, Christina, the truth is I'm afraid there may be nothing there to find out. In fact nothing there. My mind is full of characters whom I see as defined shapes. But I'm like water." He thought, "That's not the whole truth." "The truth is, Christina, that I don't much care for myself. I don't terribly enjoy realising myself. And it's sickening that, without any deliberate attention, I shall write myself. No one can help it. Thank God the G.P.—"

"What's that, Mr. M'Clane?"

"Your readers, if you have any. That they read you without knowing you. Even the critical biographer can't pick up all the clues."

"Do you always know what you'll write next on a page?" she asked, lingering.

Poignant as he had found her a few minutes ago, he reproached himself that the question at once made her tedious, and he began to wish she was gone. He was ashamed when she accepted his facetious answer gravely in good faith.

"I've put the glucose to your hand," she said, slowly moving, "and you've only to heat the water in the kettle." She hesitated and said with the short laugh of the peasant who fears to betray desire which would so increase the difficulty of obtaining: "I'd like to read that book you wrote, Mr. M'Clane—*Nora* is it called? Have you a copy handy that you'd lend me? I'd read it times in the day. An old copy that you'd not mind would do."

He was amazed. "Good lord, I've not seen a copy for years, Christina! I never kept one, and if I had I wouldn't have it here."

"It's no matter. I'll be back before the hour, sir, and let you get down to hear the news."

She gave him her sad smile, a diffident parting of the lips, anxious and evanescent, and revealing that she had bad teeth. "That's why she doesn't laugh," he thought. Left alone, he idly considered her while he chafed to get to the writing table and teased himself as one teases an impatient child. "Yes, I'm coming—you wait a little! I wonder who once told her her arms were pretty?" She had told him, bridling girlishly, that she took great care of them. The tube of Lanoline she kept by the kitchen sink. In this icy room she wore short sleeves. She raised her bare arms to her hair with a heavily self-conscious casualness and a shyly complacent assurance that he must admire them. He could see the immature coquetry of the coy and guileless creature in her teens that she had been. "Is there anything left in this world more coy and guileless than those working-class Irish girls?" And she had never stopped to realise she was not still in her teens. The coyness was faded, but it was unchanged. Yet he would bet that she glanced no more than once a day, and that hurriedly on a dark morning, in her bedroom looking glass, and that never in her life had she taken count of her thin, widely sweeping, glistening eyebrows and her graceful neck. "Only her neckline is always too low and shows those hollows." But two men had desired her, and she was doubtless convinced, under her humility, that all men looked on her with desire; and so she modestly lowered her eyes when she talked to him.

He lit the candle again and heated the mixture of glucose and milk and water on the spirit lamp on the bedside

table. He deeply hated the nasal feeding. When he gave the preliminary test of a few drops of boiled water through the catheter passed down through her nostril into her throat, he felt the passage of the liquid through his own nose, and his nerves quivered. She did not choke at the water, so he poured the feed slowly through the tube. He could not believe she did not feel it. His excessive gentleness, from his terror of hurting her, made the process far slower than when Dyàn Dutt had done it to show him. Yet he had talked of her to-night in the past tense.

"Thank God, that's done!"

He washed the tube and the catheter in the rest of the kettleful of water and dropped them into the enamel bowl of cold water on the table. He gazed beyond him into the shadows of the squalid room in which there was so little of her. She had not even set a vase of flowers anywhere. She had bought no flowers. She had only placed Brian on the mantelpiece, and now Brian was gone. But had she ever been in this room? He thought back over the months since he returned to England, and it seemed that all he could remember of her, until they had last stood together on the pavement down there, was silence.

"All I said," he began for the fiftieth time in his mind, "was, 'Darling, I think things look threatening. I believe we ought to grab hold of what cash we have left and make a move for England.' We'd just come out of the house. She didn't say anything to that. I thought she was thinking it over. Then what did I say? I said, entirely as a joke, 'It doesn't seem that we've escaped the war.' And then she said it." She had said it and, the next mo-

ment, not having looked at him, nor at the car approaching from his side— "How could she, how *dared* she say that to me?" And he felt again that he had only to stoop and shake her as she lay to make her listen to him. Her face, when they had taken her up, made him think she had stepped from the kerb blinded by tears. That would have been a queer thing. He had never known her to cry.

This cold! He had a ravenous craving for chocolate, but there was none in the cupboard. On the writing table he saw the green book he had borrowed from Francis. The back was loosened from the violence with which the poet had flung it at him.

"I'm coming presently," he still teased the impatient child.

He opened the green book and read:

*Nine and ninety treasure crocks
This keen miser-fairy hath,
Hid in mountains, woods and rocks,
Ruin and round tow'r, cave and rath
And where the cormorants build.*

On the flyleaf, in a woman's hand, was written, "To my darling little Francis on his tenth birthday."

"I was eleven," he thought.

He saw himself lying on the shore that pushed narrow, short fingers into the little lake, when it had seemed to him that these poems were made out of all that surrounded him.

*Soft slept the beautiful autumn
In the heart, on the face of the Lough—
It's heart, whose pulses were hushed
Till you knew the life of the tide
But by a wash on the shore.*

*In Cavan of little lakes
As I was walking with the wind—*

*The very spirit of summer breathes to-day,
Here where I sun me in a dreamy mood,
And laps the sultry leas, and seems to brood—*

He put down the book, and gradually his eyes focussed on the stained boards of the table and the candle's great shadow on the ceiling over Moira. The door and the window trembled with a sudden slight movement in their frames.

"It's the wind," he said.

He sat listening in the motionless stillness of the night.

Perhaps, at ten, Francis had moulded his first efforts on "*In Cavan of little lakes.*" Or didn't he say Mangan? *Oh, my dark Rosaleen, Do not sigh, do not weep—*

Crumpled on the floor among rejected sheets of his own was a copy of the *New Challenge*, two days old. "Wait!" he still tormented the child, and, picking up the paper, he found Francis' contribution in English, beginning, "Let us stand firm, knowing what threatens us. Be the newest martyrs of freedom, rather than the latest surrender to tyranny!" The printing press was so old it was ready for the scrap heap, and the print was thick and blurred.

"Yes, I'm coming now," Michael muttered to the child. He pulled his writing pad before him, and carefully he drew a cat chasing a rat on the clean page. The little movement like a capricious breath of wind again ran up through the house and made his door and window tremble in their frames. He crumpled up his drawing, unfinished.

"Lose no time, fool! At it!"

She sat down by the bed. Presently she began to draw her fingers rhythmically across his forehead. Its dry heat disturbed her. She went over to each of the two windows, and pulled the blinds halfway down.

~~"Is that better?" she whispered, as she came back to the bed.~~

~~"Amiel!" she whispered. She~~

~~It was as if night. It seemed that night~~

THE SEVENTH NIGHT CONTINUED

"It's just the hour, Mr. M'Clane."

"Thanks, Christina, I'm going." As he stood up he said to her, "If we could have the central heating on I feel we could put up with anything."

"We can't get any more coal. I've to do with what I have below, and that's only for the cooking, and the baths on two days in the week. There's no hope of the heating."

He smiled at her with his stiff lips, and went out and crept down the stairs in the state, familiar to him, of moving in two worlds at once. It made his movements less sure even than they would otherwise have been. He was a long time getting down the stairs, clinging to the stair rail, to Dyàn Dutt's room on the second floor. The Indian was the only one in the house, except Miss Jardine, who had a wireless. It stood on a small cabinet of books, and Monsieur Achille Hamel squatted on his heels in front of it. "So she didn't find him," thought Michael. He guessed that Monsieur had been hiding in the wardrobe, the doors of which swung wide open as the room's owner would certainly not have left them. Monsieur showed an intense fondness for Dyàn Dutt, who had once found him wandering in the town and had made him go home when his wife could not get him to come with her. Christina had never forgiven this exertion of a stronger influence than hers over what was her property. But Dyàn Dutt in his spare time

would sometimes keep Monsieur amused and out of mischief, and that was why she had taken him into the house, although she did not take coloured gentlemen.

Monsieur was dapper and graceful, wearing a small brown imperial. He had found a purple and yellow muffler in the wardrobe and had twisted it round his head, as Dyàn Dutt must once have shown him, to form a turban. He wore over his own suit a summer blazer in red and yellow which enveloped his small body, the sleeves coming down over his hands. A pair of emerald green silk pyjama legs trailed beyond his boots as he squatted. He was dialling the stations rapidly round and round. The yapping din of European languages that resulted, made him smile with sly amusement, as he dialled still faster—German, French, English, Italian, with the scream of a soprano like a screech of pain.

Seeing Michael he scrambled to his feet, holding up his green trouser legs.

"Monsieur M'Clane, I am enchanted." He added with a little shrug and bow, "I assume the charivari to amuse my little Marguerite. She is ill. It's the typhoid fever they say."

"If I were you," said Michael, "I'd have those things off, and back in the wardrobe before Dyàn Dutt wakes up and catches you."

"I am invisible," said Monsieur in a displeased tone. "You do not see me."

"O.K." said Michael. He turned to the wireless and while he tuned in he heard Monsieur behind him rapidly slipping off and folding up the blazer and the pyjama legs. Then the wardrobe doors closed and Monsieur trotted

quietly across the room. Some people were coming in. Monsieur passed them without a word or look.

"Monsieur is invisible," called out Michael. The older residents among them smiled briefly.

The room was half full of people come from their own rooms to get the news. Michael did not know some of the refugees. The febrile girl in the full, flame-coloured velvet dressing-gown was the daughter of a Count whose country estate was in the north. He was the old man with her. In the maplewood bedstead Dyàn Dutt lay with his face buried in the pillow. Neither the din of Monsieur's dialling nor the noise they all made coming in made him stir a muscle.

The Count's daughter looked at him, and said to nobody special, "Ought we to wake him? I think it awfully nice of him to let us come in like this, don't you?" Her eager eyes seemed to be on Michael.

"Yes," said Michael. "But he's done in. He's been at the hospital nearly twenty-four hours."

"Better afterwards perhaps," said her father. He glanced intimately at his daughter and her wide mouth smiled back at him.

The stark cry of Chopin's Revolutionary Study continued to be projected over the air. Nobody listened to it although they were not speaking much.

The piano stopped. In the following pause, Michael rushed with a burst as it were, to the surface and the light in the room dazzled him with its brightness. Everyone's face looked clear cut and he saw them with wonder. He got a gulp of sickening excitement that nearly throttled him.

The announcer's voice blared, then faded. Reception was awful. Neumann was trying to get it clearer.

"For God's sake—that's better, that's all right now. Leave it alone, don't touch it!"

The voice was clear enough. It did not speak long, and when it had told them, Neumann, who was standing nearest, switched off with a mechanical action. There was no more to hear.

Michael's stare went vaguely over and past the flame-coloured dressing-gown. The girl's eyes had a lost, questioning look that reminded him of a monkey's. But they were not really seeing him, or seeing anything.

"*'The night'*" went on far back in his mind. "*'The night seemed to fall into the room with the drawing of the curtains.'* Leave the night out of it, ass! You want the simple, matter of fact touch there."

It was at this moment that Lena, the little Polish maid, entered, pushing a mahogany tea-waggon, upon which were glasses and four bottles of champagne in a bucket of ice. She did not notice the stillness and the blank, stricken faces. She was in mortal terror lest the motion should disturb the champagne, besides, she was intent on remembering everything the old man, the Count, had told her she was to do when he gave her the bottles. Arrived triumphantly in the centre of the floor she stood with her hands at her sides and her head up, while she proclaimed, in her clogging Polish accent the little set speech which, earlier in the evening, he had taught her.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you are asked to drink to our brave men who have won this action."

Before the empty fireplace the hearthrug made by Monsieur was a yellow ground surrounding a huge blue eye, the

lashes worked in black wool. The old Count was standing on the pupil of the eye. His daughter rushed to him and held on to his arm.

"Oh, daddy!" she cried. "Laugh at it! Do laugh at it! It's funny, isn't it?" she appealed to them all. "Really it's terribly funny."

Lena, who was staring round at the faces, suddenly threw her apron over her head and uttered a loud sobbing wail. The old Count with his daughter on his arm slowly stepped off the hearthrug and walked to the tea-waggon where he stood. He had a thin tonsure of long white fluffy hair, and white, thin hands mauve at the finger joints. His voice quavered and was too high, but it had dignity. His false teeth did not quite fit.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I believed that certain information had reached us to-day. It did not occur to me to doubt that information. Our soldiers have stood supreme in many dark moments of our troubled and splendid history. Besides I am a religious man. I believed that God was with the right against the strong. Yes, I believed that—yes."

"Daddy!" the girl said, pulling gently at him.

"I am an old man. I planned this little surprise to celebrate the confirmation of the news of victory in the north. We cannot celebrate that victory, but neither have we heard defeat confirmed. We have at least not yet surrendered. Our soldiers are fighting gloriously still.

"So we will drink to them because they have fought for victory. The victory in this war will be long in coming. We will drink to the brave men who have died fighting for it, and for us. Ladies and gentlemen, in their name, I give you—the final victory!"

The champagne immediately flushed his face, and the island of bald crown surrounded by his fluffy hair.

The delicious warmth after the first drink! No one had eaten anything since supper of lentil soup at seven. "Everyone in the town," Michael said to the Count's daughter, "must have had lentil soup for supper. Why are there so many lentils and tins of peaches, and hardly anything else?" He looked about him at the faces beginning to flush and liven.

"Have a cigarette," said the Count's daughter. He took one greedily.

"I've longed for this all day."

"I heard the machine-gun fire," she said to him. "Just before we came down here. Did you hear it?"

"Yes, I heard it."

"Daddy said it was the wind." She had a thin face and a large thin mobile mouth, vividly reddened. Her bright, dark eyes had a sad hunger and a sad childishness. "Is it true you're writing a novel?" she asked him brightly.

He was drawn to her.

"How *lovely* it feels to be warm!" he exclaimed.

"I hope your novel is a big success."

"That's awfully nice of you."

Neumann who had come straight from the Gazelle at midnight took out his violin and gave them the *Liebes-traum*. It bathed Michael in a yearning happiness. He could see nothing very clearly through the pleasant haze gathering in front of him.

"Lovely, lovely music!" the Count's daughter said. "It makes one want to cry, and yet I love it."

Dyàn Dutt had not stirred. He lay with his face in the pillow in his kitten-like sleep which their noise could not

disturb. The alarm clock ticked on the table beside him. No one said anything more about waking him.

"Wonderful to sleep like that!"

"It's like a sort of trance."

Michael heard the rasping voice of Francis Harte. The poet was talking loudly, argumentatively and contentedly to an old man, one of the refugees, who wore a brown velvet skull cap. He had dropped his ferocious geniality.

"You'd say that Baudelaire's translation of Poe is better stuff," he rasped happily, "than Poe is himself. No, I'm not with you there at all, now I'll show you why." He caught sight of Michael and grinned at him in the friendliest way. "How's the story book going?"

Michael grinned back. "Rottenly."

"When will it be published?" asked the Count's daughter in the dressing-gown. She giggled and hiccupped at the same time.

"Let's see—oh, in the autumn, probably."

"Do you think it'll be well received? Are you terribly afraid of the critics? I should be."

"It will be published in England?" said the old man in the skull cap in a slow, thickened voice. "But perhaps translated, too."

"A toast! Toast!" shouted Francis. He did his best to climb on a chair, but he had to give it up. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you—what did you tell me was the name of it?" he bellowed to Michael.

"*Amiel*," he muttered.

"I give you *Amiel*, the new novel by the distinguished author, Mr. Michael M'Clane!"

There was a clamour and someone started to clap.

"Speech!" bellowed Francis.

Michael's heart glowed to him. He longed to hug him and to swear they would be friends for ever. He took a step forward, and caught hold of the washstand.

"The il—lust—ri—ous poet," he got out, "who has so generously," where was he? "I'm more grateful—I very greatly appreciate—I mean that I appreciate your kindness more than I possibly—"

It was a quarter to two when he stumbled from the warm room into the chill blackness of the passage. He crawled on hands and knees up the stairs. He was a wasp in October crawling over the stones on the garden path. The cold of autumn had made him so sleepy that it was all he could do to drag himself along, let alone move his wings.

Christina opened the bedroom door to him. She had heard him trying to open it. She carried the night-light and she looked at him.

"I'm all right," he muttered. "You needn't worry about me—"

She steadied him by the arm. Her touch surprised him.

"I'm all right," he repeated with a tipsy laugh, and he caught her shoulder and pulled her face close up to his.

"*What are you doing?*" Her whisper of horror partly checked him. She gave him a push away from her which sent him staggering. He might have tumbled if she had not caught his arm quickly again and saved him. She helped him to his bed where she made him lie down, and then she pushed and pulled him under the blankets, tucking them in round him. Almost directly he was asleep.

He woke perfectly sober with a sentence in his brain. "You've got it, fool," he said to himself.

Four chimed from Moira's little silver travelling clock, a wedding present. A ghost-like figure seemed to glide and

stand over his bed. It was Christina in the faint glow from the night-light she carried.

"Yes?" he said stupidly, lying and staring at her.

She had come to see that he was still comfortable.

"It's time Mrs. M'Clane had her feed, sir," she said to him.

"Did you hear, Christina? They've broken through."

"I didn't hear. But I've been sitting listening to the firing, and we never heard it before. So I said, 'They've broken through, and they're driving us back.' I've been in here since you went down for the news," she said.

"Oh, Christina, you've had six hours. Why didn't you wake me?" he said angrily.

"Don't be troubling yourself now. Sure, it's been no trouble at all to me. I never was one to require a lot of sleep. I don't like to try the feeding for fear I'd be choking her. But after you're finished at it, if you'd feel you'd be better for another hour or so of sleep, you'll take it, I hope you will, sir—"

"Good lord—go and lie down, Christina!"

"Your shoes are here." She gave them to him. "I've boiled the tube and the funnel ready for you. You've only to give it to her."

"Thanks."

"I could go down," she said, still standing and watching him, "and see if Mr. Dutt is gone to the hospital yet, and if he's not gone maybe he'd come up and give her the feed if you'd rather, sir."

"Why on earth should I rather? Go and lie down, will you? Get what sleep you can."

"She thinks I'm not sober enough to give it," he thought.
"She has about as much tact as Moira."

She went slowly, and he carried the night-light round the screen and lit the candle on the table beside Moira. His hands were quite steady. What had possessed him to waste that hour in Dyàn Dutt's room? Such scores of hours and millions of minutes and half minutes wasted! Oh, if he could get hold of them all again, what a store they would be! and he would relinquish them like grains of gold dust. No split second of them would get away empty and unworked.

"Oh, God!"

He had poured through the tube too fast. In the horrible moments that followed he thought he had killed her.

"I'm so sorry, darling! I'm so sorry!" When she was cleaned up, and the tube washed and put in its bowl, he got up and took a turn about the room to steady his nerves. It had not been a bad choke. "But I won't be able to feed her again if I keep thinking of it." So he thought of how he was free. "I'm free!" It was enough to make one mad with exultation. Could there have been a day he had cursed for its slowness in passing? Was there a night he had lain through, feeling that life was one too many for him? "Blasted, blasted fool!"

He went back and stood beside Moira.

"What were we doing," he whispered to her, "not being happy? What were we *doing*?"

Her loud breathing filled his ears. He was on his knees beside her bed. On a winter night long ago in Cullenstown, a small boy in his nightgown had knelt, sobbing with terror, against a bed at the head of which two candles were burning: "Mother, wake up! Put your hand out to me—just put your hand out! I'm so afraid!"

A few sounds broke from him, crouched by Moira. Then

he knelt for a little time, not calling out in fear any more. Amiel and Molly were walking in the ruins of the old church at Cullenstown. On the foremost of the two ancient graves within the walls of the church a cluster of beautiful wild purple orchis was growing up through the grass. "It's such a long, long time," he said, "since I danced." He begged her to dance with him. They went waltzing between the headstones and over the mounds, and the orchis was crushed to pulp under their feet.

Michael dragged at his stiff, cold limbs, until he was standing. Had he fallen asleep when there was no one to watch her? He looked at her anxiously but she was just the same. The candle too looked no smaller. It could only have been a few minutes that he had been asleep.

He put the candle on the writing-table and read:

She sat down by the bed. Presently she began to draw her fingers rhythmically across his forehead. Its dry heat disturbed her. She went over to each of the two windows and pulled the blinds halfway down,

He wrote slowly with his gloved hand:

and then she sat down again to wait for the doctor to come.

THE EIGHTH, NINTH, TENTH, ELEVENTH, AND TWELFTH DAYS

A boisterous gust met him as he turned the corner into the square at seven o'clock, hoping for a top place in the shopping queue. As he struggled against the wind, through the half-frozen mud, he clung to his satisfaction that he was making it easier for Christina. She had been up half the night and she was now sitting quietly beside Moira instead of facing the long stand before the shops in the terrible weather. She had smiled and thanked him very nicely when he had urged this to her.

Only he could not walk very fast. The gale hurled itself in his face, but he opened his mouth and drank in gulps of it. It came from the sea and he fancied a salt trace on his lips.

The little square he entered he used to pass through morning after morning on his way to the park when he was here writing *Lenore*. It had been September. Gay awnings were hung over the shops. Barrows of fruit had shone at points beside the pavement. In the centre of the square three flower girls sat every day among hillocks of roses and gladioli. Here the barrel organ had played *Gay Vienna*, with the monkey catching pea-pods the children threw to him.

Now all the shops in the square showed blank and darkened windows, and windows smashed by the shock of the bombs which had destroyed the power station. Outside the grocer and the baker huddles of people already were

slowly forming. They stood silently, hunched up with cold, which made them look as though they bent under the weight of the gas-masks hung between their shoulders. On the island where the flower girls had stood a machine-gun emplacement was built of sandbags and roofed with corrugated iron.

When he at last reached the grocery counter, he found he had lost his list. He had to take what they would give him. No food was coming in by rail. The lines had been bombed and the trains were standing still. When the ice on the river broke up some barges might get through. He came away from the shops so exhausted by standing that he turned into the park, and collapsed on a seat. His heart was racing, and his legs felt like heavy stones. Both the doctors at Lausanne had said that rest and care was all he wanted, and his legs would be as good as ever. They were right, he knew. Only he couldn't help imagining himself a cripple and a semi-paralytic, never able to walk hard, or swim, or play tennis again. "But, of course, fool," he said, "this weakness and breathlessness is simply that you've not been eating so very much lately." His legs were picking up all right. There were years of sound activity before them still. He was thirty-two only. He looked at his legs stretched out before him in the snowy slush. It was true he had not swum or played tennis these six years. How many people have made full use of their legs before the arteries harden and the muscles soften, and they are old? "Next summer I'll go over to Ireland, and I'll ride and swim, and play a lot of tennis—" He snapped off as if a black curtain came down.

The cold wet of the seat was soaking through his overcoat, but he was scared he would faint if he stood up.

The little ornamental lake beyond him was again frozen with rough, dark ice, which again was cracking. The ducks and gulls were all gone. They were so tame that he supposed they must have been easy to catch; but he had not been able to get any of them in the shops.

It had been so hot that September that he used to sprawl on the grass in his bathing shorts, writing *Lenore* and dangling his legs in the water.

He swept a long, slow look about him, dwelling on each object he could see. It was how a man who knew himself to be going blind might memorise a loved scene to hold it in his mind in the dark. He shut his eyes, and there in the darkness were the bare trees lunging in the wind and the dark, breaking surface of the lake. He opened his eyes and gazed wistfully at the trees, but alas! he knew few of them. He had never known them.

But the big, dark shrub growing beside the seat, he knew that. Everyone knew it, the commonest, suburban evergreen that grew. Everyone knew it and no one looked at it. He broke off a spray and began examining it intently. It was how a man who knew himself to be going blind might strive to see one thing—the humblest—completely, before everything was memory. From between two leaves at the head of the forked red stem sprang the clustered buds, the tiny green balls tinted with red. There were twenty-three buds in the middle cluster, seventeen on another and fourteen in the third. "Those high grey walls," he had written in *The Ultimatum*, "which let little in and let nothing out except a scream." When he got up off the seat, because he was too cold to sit still any longer, he put the laurestinus in his button-hole. It seemed like an old friend. Besides, it seemed barbarous to throw away the only flower he had

ever grown to know thoroughly. "I must hurry," he thought, dragging along.

Christina's eyes remarked the laurestinus. He laughed facetiously, and pulled it out. "It seemed a pity to throw it away," he explained.

She said nothing. But when she brought up his lunch an hour late, there was with it on the tray a small Belleek pottery vase which she had filled with water. By the dust floating on the water, it might be seen that the vase, in spite of a careful rub-up on the outside with a duster, was seldom used. It had been a wedding present to Christina's mother who had given it to Christina on her first marriage, and she kept it beside the mugs which had belonged to Dan and Marguerite on the top shelf of the kitchen dresser. She had had to climb on a chair to take it down. She did not tell Michael this. He didn't notice the dust. He had forgotten the laurestinus by that time and would certainly have thrown it in the wastepaper basket. However, being supplied with a vase, he stuck the spray in it on the mantelpiece. So the room had a flower after all.

Michael, gobbling his lunch, then fell strenuously again to his work. He did not now tease himself by postponing, nor did he draw a cat chasing a rat. Before beginning, he did not now even read a page of *The Lances of Lynwood* which he had found, a battered red copy, in the drawer of his writing-table. Christina did not know how it had got there. Some lodger, she supposed, must have left it, and Michael had speculated on the sort of lodger this might possibly have been. A few pages of this book read before he began to write had, he had found, a stimulating, incentive effect. But there was now no time.

Doggedly Michael now sealed up the defences of his

intense concentration from assault. Passionately he withdrew his senses inward, as you might take candles from window ledges to place them in the centre of the room.

“‘Do you know,’ she said shyly,” [he wrote], “for romantic as she was she dreaded even now to give an impression of being sentimental. ‘I think I know why you went on living. Why you could never have let yourself die.’”

It sounded as if a wave of water rushed up through the house and hurled itself against his door. The door shivered and the window panes jumped. He sat holding his pen. He felt cold as sharp as though the wave had washed over him.

The chime of the clock was more awful than the wave. He would have stopped the clock, only that he depended on it to tell him when to feed and rub Moira. And even if he stopped it, the moments were passing. The clock chimed, striking sharp through his absorption, and he sat as if the sound had frozen him into stone before he wrote again. Another hour was gone.

The grey afternoon darkened, and it was time to fix the black-out, and to light Moira’s night-light and the stump of yesterday’s candle on the writing-table. This moment laid him defenceless to anguish and ripped away the immunity for which the world would not forgive him. Another day was gone.

Stumbling the streets in the early morning with Christina’s string bag, he often smiled. Figures were in the square like shadows in a fog with which he clumsily collided. A woman carrying an enamel jug clutched it tighter and showed her teeth at him like a gaunt, angry dog. “Try to snatch it, would you?” It was horse blood, to make good

soup with. She had walked all the way to the garrison's canteen to wheedle it. Seeing that he hardly heard her, and remembering his abstracted smile and uneven walk, she passed along, wondering, as she hurried, what shock of the war had turned this young man's brain. Crazy, poor young fellow—in a world of his own, not seeing any longer what was round him! One envied him almost.

A zooming drone began overhead. Everyone looked up at the sky. They paused in their walking, their shuffling or waiting, and then they stared questioningly at each other. There were some sharp, thunderous explosions. "They're machine-gunning!" "It's not this street, it's the next." The queue of shoppers stamped and jostled each other into the grocer's. The square was empty. People were hammering at doors in the deep doorways of the houses. Michael was passing the church porch. He stumbled through the open door and fell into a seat in the darkness. The wail of the siren came between the bursts of unimpeded machine-gun fire. All the windows of the church had been shattered in the bombing of the fifth night. The flames of three tapers on the altar were blown wildly by the draught hurtling through the window-frames, but they never quite expired. The church was already half full of people kneeling. The firing stopped and the plane was no longer heard. But the All Clear did not sound. A voice out of the shadows near the altar sounded:

"Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me, for my soul trusteth in thee, and under the shadow of thy wings shall be my refuge until this tyranny be overpast.

"O go not from me, for trouble is hard at hand, and there is none to help me.

"Hast thou not cast us out, O God, wilt not thou, O God, go out with our hosts? O be thou our help in trouble, for vain is the help of man."

The taper flames were bent backwards until they hung down from the heads of the tapers. Two never righted themselves; they were out:

"My knees are weak from fasting: my flesh is dried up for want of fatness."

"Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and forgettest our misery and trouble?"

"Lift up thy hands towards him for the life of the young children that faint for hunger in the top of every street."

"The young children ask bread, and no man breaketh it to them."

"Lord, how long wilt thou look upon this? O deliver my soul from the calamities which they bring on me, and my darling from the lions."

"Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog."

"This life in me, let it be born! Save it—let it not be lost!" Then he staggered to his feet and the old woman kneeling beside him put out a brown claw and steadied him.

"God be merciful," she said, "to the one you prayed for. It was your wife?"

"No," he said, recoiling from himself with a rush of horror and shame. The steady All Clear sounded.

The one taper on the left was still burning. Someone lifted it and lit the two others from it, and the three again were blowing bravely backwards and forwards on the altar. He was leaving his string bag in the pew, only the old woman hobbled after him with it.

People were coming out of doorways in the square.

"Why is it," he thought, "that one taper kept alight?"

Trying to hurry, he passed the other church at the corner of the square, but he had to stop and stare. Was it possible? A wedding party was leaving the porch. The bride, in white with a net veil, held to her bridegroom's arm and bunched her dress carefully, knee high, out of the wet. The bridegroom, spruced up after his night shift, wore the uniform of an auxiliary fireman. Two bridesmaids in pink followed, but there were no bouquets. The party climbed into the wreck of an old four-wheeler cab, between the shafts of which nine young firemen had harnessed themselves. Lengths of white ribbon had been tied from the carriage windows to the shafts, but the blowing rain had twisted and soddened them. A few small boys among the little crowd of women and old men who had been arrested by the sight, waved after the cab, and howled. Michael mildly astonished them by cheering uproariously, too. There were holes in his defences. The date of the wedding would have been settled weeks ago. The bride—a shopgirl? He thought so—had had her dress and the bridesmaids' all ready. She had planned them for months. She must wear them. It couldn't be helped that there were no flowers in the shops and no taxis running. Why wait? Wait for what? She and he were alive and breathing now.

"Oh, good luck to you both—good luck! Pull through for God's sake!"

The cab was still in sight, though it had started off in dashing style. Perhaps the young firemen were tired. Was there a meal waiting for them somewhere after the wedding?

The street in front of the church looked wet and deso-

late when the little flash of colour, like the fugitive gleam of a rainbow, was gone.

One of the ragged children made a dart and snatched a loaf out of Michael's basket, and was off like a streak while Michael swore, mad with rage and impotence. He had stood for an hour and a quarter in the wet and wind for that loaf. He had been able to get only two for the whole household. His passionate animosity against the starving boy was more than he had felt at any moment in six years towards the enemy. It was not that he wanted the bread for himself. The women dispersed, shrugging their shoulders, some smiling half in pity, for the unfortunate, foolish young man. To confess to Christina what had happened would be intolerable. Was he to keep no one's respect?

Opening the door with his key, he limped along the narrow passage to the head of the stairs which led down to the kitchen, from where Lena popped up to take his basket.

"I could get only one loaf," he said, "and I had to pay double for it."

"O God!" She was horrified.

Returning along the passage, he heard the voice of Falk, the American, in Francis' room. Then Francis' door was opened, and Michael slipped back into the shadows at the top of the kitchen stairs. He watched Falk and Francis go into the street, after which he slowly mounted the first of the four flights. "It seems to take longer than yesterday." He heard someone, in the room shared by several of the women refugees, sobbing. It was the girl in the velvet dressing-gown, perhaps.

The vast shape of Miss Jardine in her pink wrapper—for now she stayed in bed all day—was descending the

stairs towards him. Miss Jardine never denied that she stayed in the house for Monsieur's cooking. She was in a different class from the other residents, a proportion of which was always Irish, on account of the Catholic Institute and College in the town.

"Does your wife stand the cold?" she asked him.

"She's still breathing, yes."

"That's something!"

"Yes," he said.

He opened his door, sniffing the familiar, faintly anti-septic, faintly foul air of the sickroom. It was like waking from a dream. The memory of the streets dropped away, and of his hiding from Francis in the passage. His irritations and inefficiencies, and his depression at his inefficiencies, were all left outside, they did not come in with him. He limped to his writing-table like running to his bride's bed.

Christina was finishing rubbing Moira's back with methylated spirit to prevent bedsores forming. Her rubbing was painstaking but, for all her delicate appearance, she was heavy-handed. Often when she polished furniture she would knock off an ornament standing on it. While she rubbed, she watched his face set in absorption.

"Now she's nicely put for you, Mr. M'Clane, until you'll feed her at eleven. You'll get your dinner sent up as usual, but it'll be a bit late. I said to myself the raid was keeping you. 'And Lord send,' I said, 'he's in shelter from the machine-gunning.' Wasn't it terrible that, sir?"

He did not answer, and did not notice when she went out, closing the door, though her heavy hand closed it loudly.

"She had her horrific imaginings," [he wrote], "which

she kept decently a secret from everyone. A few words, a half implication, would breed images in her mind of a horror which her eyes were never likely to see." He detested these sentences and dashed his pen through them. The fluid in his brain moved sluggishly, half frozen. He snatched up *The Lances of Lynwood*. "All right, if you must, you fool!"

The window was kept closed for warmth, and to muffle the firing as much as possible from the bed where Moira lay. Once in every four hours he opened the window and let in the cold air for ten minutes. Dyàn Dutt said she should have the air changed. Michael left the writing-table again to swab both her lips and the waterproof sheet. This did not disturb his concentration. The movement stirred the fluid in his brain, so that it flowed more rapidly when he took up his pen again. He had asked Christina for an old sheet, and this he had tied by its corners to the head and foot rails of her bed to catch the mortar which was shaken from the ceiling; and under this canopy she lay breathing. It was a companionable sound, and he did not come back to solitude. They were together peacefully in a stillness which was shattered for neither by sounds from outside. They had seldom been peaceful together.

When her silver clock chimed midday, he got up and went to the sink outside the door in the passage to fill the kettle. While it was boiling he took her temperature and pulse, and noted them on the chart. He warmed his hands under the blankets, and then he had to turn her on her face. Under the bedclothes he slowly rubbed her long back with the spirit, the slight flesh clammy and flaccid under his hands. She had grown so thin. Her skin was ridged with her backbone and ribs. He emptied and filled each of

the hot-water bottles from the kettle and placed them outside the blanket next to her. For the first time he passed the catheter up her nostril without terror and nausea. He poured the water to test its position, and he was thinking how she who had been so positive, independent and aloof was now as dependent on him as a newly weaned infant for nourishment to keep her body alive. He could not trust Christina to feed her. The heavy hands with their bursting chilblains were not skilful. Christina had besides a terror of the business. "She depends on me for her life!" He was awed and filled with strange tenderness. He had never had anyone quite dependent on him before.

On the tenth afternoon, he started round, dropping the pen, at the sound of a crowd of people stampeding up the stairs to his door. But at once he shrugged his shoulders and bent sideways from the chair to pick up his pen. Were they firing so near? He had not seen a paper to-day or yesterday. . . .

He went to Moira's drawer to find a clean nightgown. The faintest fragrance of jasmine came from the silk things in her drawer. Perceptible through the sickroom smells, it was the essence of Moira. He felt that he had heard her voice suddenly and that she had brushed by him. Then his hands met a hard edge under the brightly coloured softness. It was a book. He felt some curiosity at finding it there. It was not like Moira to keep books in a drawer with her underclothes. He could not at once identify it, for it had been encased in cardboard which had been covered in blue velvet to protect the book's own covers from any hurt. It fell open, and there was his name on the fly-leaf with a stroke drawn through it and below, the formal little

inscription: "For Moira Vane from the author," and the date. He could have bought a copy for her from his publishers, but he had felt a mystic significance in giving her his own copy that bore his signature. It had been an early June morning. Leaning from his bedroom window before breakfast, he had seen her below him on the lawn. She wore a blue print frock with a long blue ribbon hanging straight from the back of the neck. She had looked up. "Please Moira, will you wait there! I want to come down to you. I want to give you something."

A month after the June morning they were married. During the whirlwind years since they had first left England, after they returned from Russia, he had never once seen her with the book. If he had thought of it at all, he would have imagined that it lay packed in the attic of the house in Dorset with her belongings that she didn't want abroad. But he had never thought of it. He thought now of all the years that she had carried it with her, of all their journeys, of each of the alien, deteriorating rooms where they had lived. She had made cardboard covers padded with blue velvet to keep it from getting soiled or shabby. It was her secret. While he held the book, still a little dazed by his discovery, he doubted that she had ever really spoken to him since the night when she had begged him to stay in England and write—she spoke so clearly to him now. "The Michael I married," she said, "I've kept safe. You forgot him. But I remember, and I have him still."

He moved slowly, with the book in his hands, to stand over her bed. The screen made a twilight in the alcove in the afternoons of these bitter spring days. But where was she in this suspension of her keen existence where there was no past nor present nor future? He bent, dreading the

look of a small, dark spot which appeared on her yellow cheek. Her appearing symptoms each filled him with horror and dread. But the spot was a small spider which dashed over her nose and reached her left eyelid, when he dashed it off with his handkerchief, "O God!" he muttered. For the first time, looking at her, he felt an impotent, fierce scorching of tears.

He sat at his table without writing. The day *Lenore* was accepted—what a day! A Saturday, and he had galloped downstairs in his dressing-gown and danced his landlady round the waist in her kitchen until the breakfast coffee on the gas ring boiled over. A day for which it was worth having lived to die! Thinking of it, he was leaning back smiling, and the muscles of his face were relaxing. Was it equalled?—not quite equalled perhaps—by the day the first press notice came in. "I shouldn't wonder if I could recite that notice by heart." He must have read the notice forty times surreptitiously during the two days after he got it. "Mr. M'Clane," it said, "rouses an eager curiosity to see what he will write next."

He began to turn the pages of *Lenore*. He grew absorbed. As he read, he understood at last what had roused the sages' curiosity. But the curiosity and the hopes must be long forgotten. "Michael M'Clane?" might someone say? "I believe he wrote a novel once." In a short time they would never mention him.

The thousand miles he had come from being able to write this natural simplicity and grace again! He could never go back. He gazed sadly at the page he was writing. He had written *Lenore* in a top room of a house farther down the street below him, but on the sunny September days he used to take his papers into the park. He closed

the book and was about to throw it on the table, but his movement changed, and he laid it down gently. It had been divinely warm on the grass by the pond in the sun. As often as not he had bought pears in the street and eaten them while he wrote. After finishing a section, he would shove his papers in their case and race off, stimulated to wild exuberance, for a swim in the baths.

He tugged his mind away from the young man writing *Lenore* in the park. He reached for his pen while still a faint pallor of light remained.

He wrote in passionate haste, no longer correcting. While reading to Christina, he erased and altered sentences. His prolonged concentration would leave him with a ravenous hunger. The nights froze and in the daytime the gales blew. He wrote in his overcoat, wrapped to the waist in the white wool mat with the cross and the red foot.

On the tenth night he took Moira's pulse, and saw that the clover coloured varnish was peeling off her nails. "She never allowed that to happen."

When Christina came in for her first shift, he pushed himself impatiently into his bed. He forced his eyelids to close over the hard, dry stones his eyes were. His body was whirring with little wheels, and there was a deep, vibrating throbbing, too, in him. But no—the throbbing was not in his body; it was a slow zooming. "Curse it!" He woke in three hours, alert and clear headed, with the sentence he had last written distinct in his mind, as though there had been no break.

"Christina, surely you can't possibly spare time to do day-nursing, too! What about your work in the house?"

"Oh, the work will do," she answered with her dim smile.

"Of course it would be marvellous for me if you could take a shift in the afternoon, and I needn't be up and down and watching the clock. It's most frightfully good of you."

"I'm wondering if I couldn't learn the feeding as well, Sir."

"Oh, no, I must do that myself. It's really not a thing you can practise at. Thanks awfully though," he added, seeing that she turned away from him without a word and her narrow, drooping back looked like displeasure. "Now how did I offend her?" he asked himself. "If I could think of it," he thought as he dipped his pen, "as a thunder-storm! Gosh, what thunder! That sounded like a clap right over the house. But you can't have thunder with snow."

"I've taken the plates off the dresser below in the kitchen," said Christina. "The firing would have them down on the top of us."

She stayed in the room until seven and, after bringing his soup up to him, she went downstairs again and came back at nine. Monsieur, she said, had been very difficult. He didn't like her coming up here. In his monkeyish way he had put everything wrong in the kitchen to prevent her getting away earlier, but she took no notice of that and let the things lie. So then he had led her a dance until she caught him. But he had hidden the key of their bedroom, and while she was making herself tidy to come up for her shift, he had crept to the door; and he would have been out of the room, he would have locked her in, only that she saw him in time to get the key from him and put him back in bed.

She brought in with her a new tall white candle. Candles were being used in the town to cook with. The shops had

had none since two days ago. Michael never asked her where these candles came from. Perhaps he meant to, but he forgot. A set of nine candles blessed at Lourdes had been sent to Christina by her sister who was in the convent there. They were to burn for Dan, dead in the North Sea. Each night she lit one in the blue tin candlestick on the writing-table, but without daring to pray. The candle of the night before was a wavering flame, sunk far down in the holder. She pushed the new one in on it and he glanced up smiling and thanked her. He couldn't have worked at night without the candles.

The hours passed. He threw down the pen. "Now, listen!"—After reading it, digging his pen into the page, it looked to her, and writing new words, he read the second half of it again to her. Then he threw the chapter on Moira's bed. He was in a fury of restlessness, excited, harassed, and defiant. Listening to his rapid garrulity she would have thought, had she not known it to be impossible, that he'd been drinking. An almost bellicose self-confidence about him suggested intoxication.

"They'll say," he said, "that it's 'extravagant.' Anything that's at all dramatic without being proletarian is 'extravagant.' And they'll say, 'Mr. M'Clane has not been governed, in his choice of subject, by any consideration of readers' wartime preference in such matters.'"

"Will they, Mr. M'Clane?"

"They will. And some may go raking up *Lenore*—it's only eight years ago—and *they'll* say, 'Mr. M'Clane's second novel will surprise those who remember with pleasure his pretty, pathetic *Lenore*'—why shouldn't I surprise them? I've a subject in mind that would be the funniest thing since *Three Men in a Boat*—not satire, but a simple

roar. They can't tie me down. I'll make them weep and then I'll make them laugh if I want to. A fellow like Hardy is born in a *genre* and sticks in it till he dies. He can't get out of it if he tries to. I rather envy it. But I wasn't born in one. I'll have a shot at every *genre* and take 'em by surprise every time. Why not? I want to write one thing that'll be loved. I shall do a children's book too before the end. You know *The Treasure Seekers*. Well, I'd aim—"

"Do you hear something?" she asked anxiously. He had stopped, listening.

It was Moira's little silver clock chiming. It struck midnight, muted and sweetly, into the silence.

He slowly realised that there was silence. The thunder had ceased. The gentle shake and rattle of the room was the more distant guns in the northwest. Yesterday they had not heard the northwestern barrage at all. To-night it made the window panes tremble.

"Will you be going down to Mr. Dutt's room for the news?" Christina asked.

"No," he said stubbornly. Then he asked, "Will you?"

"I will not," she said.

She wore a green jumper knitted in lace stitch, with a low neck which showed the hollows above her sharp collarbones. She had knitted it herself, he guessed. There were little tufts where the stitches had torn on things, and had not been mended. Yet it had a dressiness which proclaimed it as one intended for occasions. It had short sleeves, but the cold had driven her to put on a baggy brown knitted cardigan. Only she could not reconcile herself to obliterating her arms altogether, so she had tied the cardigan round her shoulders by its sleeves.

Looking at her with attention, he saw the green glass slave bangle pushed above her left elbow. He had not seen her wear any jewellery before. She seemed ill at ease with it, constantly twisting it round her sharp elbow. She was not rolling bandages nor knitting. She sat perfectly idle. Her feet, in contrast with the delicacy of her face, were, like her hands, large and clumsy, shoved into heavy black shoes so walked over that it was a wonder she did not limp in them. In spite of their age the shoes creaked. She could not take a step in the room without his being in some degree aware of it. His glance resting on them, they retreated uneasily up to the bar of her chair, and she smoothed her skirt over them.

"Christina!" She looked startled. Her dark blue eyes under her fine sweeping brows opened wide and questioned him. "Christina, there'll be no critics and no readers! There's only you."

She did not ask a question. She smiled a slow, secretive, gratified smile.

"Isn't that fine!" she said softly. "That makes me very proud, Mr. M'Clane."

Without a glance to ask permission, she lifted the sheets of the chapter from off the bed, fingering them while she smiled her secret smile. She tried to read the wildly written lines, moving her lips as she read. He watched her, but she was entirely absorbed. She looked up at last, still holding the sheets. Unusual animation quickened her and put a pulse of blood in her anæmic cheeks.

"They started happy enough," she said, "the two of them on their honeymoon. And I suppose that now you'll make terrible things happen, shall you? It all rests with you whether they go on to be happy, or whether the bad

things come on them. Does it ever strike you that way, Mr. M'Clane?"

"I'll tell you this—the terrible things have happened."

"That's in the beginning, is it?"

"Yes. It's in Part 1. He was a great, gentle, healthy boy, exceedingly strong. He was a great boxer and swimmer. He was very affectionate, but he clung—he was too dependent. He had a sweet, placid temper that was almost never ruffled, and he adored his home and family, both the Scottish and the Russian."

"Was he happy?"

"Frightfully happy. He enjoyed almost everything. He had to have friends and they had to love him. He was too dependent. In Edinburgh when he was seven he had an old nurse and he loved her, but she didn't notice when his white suit was dirty, and she wouldn't give him a clean one. So he turned on the bath and got into it in his suit; he couldn't bear wearing it dirty. He liked making models of prehistoric things and animals for his grandfather's lectures. He had those deft, clever fingers some boys have."

"You'd never think it," said Christina. He became lost and remote in his meditations. "Will you read that part to me?" she drew him back.

"There's not time, I'm afraid."

The screened alcove, with the three in it, was the cabin of a ship which floated far off from the town on a stirless, empty sea. Nothing but space and the sea surrounded it. He felt the vibration and heard the creaks and rattles of the ship as she sailed.

"Twenty-one is too young, Christina. You can't know yourself at twenty-one. And if you don't know yourself,

how can you take precautions against yourself betraying you? What I shudder at isn't what might be done to you in there. It's what it might bring you to doing."

"In where is this, if you don't mind me asking?"

"In the dark. Where they kill souls. There's something like this—I can't get it exactly right: 'Fear him who hath power to destroy the soul. Yea, fear him.' But what about the soul destroyed? Wouldn't you fear him, too? Would you have him let out of the dark again?"

She watched him, sliding the bangle up and down over her elbow.

"Would you be afraid to die, Christina?"

She was silent, for she found herself unready to speak.

"When we were running the *Challenge*, the other fellows all carried dope to take if they were caught. I didn't. If I was shot, I was shot, but I couldn't have killed myself. And they wouldn't have shot us. They would have killed our souls, Christina."

"You're tired," she said. "Writing, writing the whole day and most of the night. It beats me—the way you keep on at it."

"I'm just a hollow tube things blow through, Christina. They're more real than I am. Can there be an individual, or a soul at all, in a hollow tube? I'm thirty-two."

"Are you that?" She fastened with subdued interest on the information.

"When the big things strike, they find some people ready for them. I wasn't ready. Oh, Christina, I'd give my soul to be ready to die! It would mean that I'd done what I could with my life."

"Where'll you be going, Mr. M'Clane?"

"To fly out of the window. I dreamed last night I did

that. I blew myself up through the navel like you blow a balloon, and then out I sailed, invisible. I sailed over this ghastly town, right away till I came to the sea."

Filled with excitement, she followed him round the screen.

"Blow out the candle," he called back to her.

But all he did was to lift up the window curtains and together they leaned over the sill into a world of lights. The sky was clear. All they could see above the chimneys were dark spaces between the cold, brilliant stars. They stared up at the stars.

"It's too beautiful," she said in an angry whisper. "It's too beautiful."

From far beyond the houses, a long white beam rose up and methodically raked a patch of sky. A dull zooming, accented like a dentist's drill, filled the night.

On the twelfth afternoon, he put down the pen and walked about the room. "There was a part of the garden," he said to Christina, "where you went through an arch in a yew hedge and up the remains of a paved path into the ruins of a little sham Italian garden. A long time ago someone had taken up a lot of the beds and put in apple trees, only they never did well there."

"Where was this, Mr. M'Clane?"

"At Dunbeg. My father used to go to the house a good deal—the pigs there got some sort of poisoning. And the old couple allowed me the free run of the grounds. There were no children in the house. I felt as if the grounds belonged to me. I knew every hole and corner of them, and I was always alone there. It was my secret from all my little friends. Till Eamona, of course, tracked me down

there—trust her! Have you watched wasps collecting food for the winter?”

“You’ll be thinking of bees, will you?”

“No. I remember one cloudy, heavy October day lying on what had been the paved path, watching wasps trying to carry away bits of a windfall apple. They’d dig their proboscis in, and then they’d fall asleep, holding the bits.” He went back to the table but, even after the break, the words he wanted would not come. He knew perfectly what he meant to write, but he couldn’t get the words for it. The longer he stared, reread the preceding sentences, the emptier he became. He jotted rapidly on the page a note of what he meant to fill in. “But what did I stop for?” he thought irritably. “Now focus, fool, stop baulking! Take this fence! Get past this stone, and then it’s all fair going again.” But it was no use. He felt stupefied, staring at the paper, and his eyes began to close. He picked up *The Lances of Lynwood*, and read:

After a pause employed in marshalling the different bands, the host advanced at an even pace, the rising sun glancing on their armour, and revealing the multitude of waving crests, and streamers fluttering from the points of the lances, like the wings of gorgeous insects. Presently a wall of glittering armour was seen advancing to meet them, with the same brilliant display. It might have seemed some mighty tournament that was there arrayed, as the two armies stood confronting each other, rather than a stern battle for the possession of a kingdom; and well might old Froissart declare, “It was a pleasure to see such hosts.”

CHAPTER VI

From the road the narrow track wound downward, no more than a sheep track, much used by cattle crossing from one to the other of the emerald green grass slopes. Moisture glistened in the hoof prints set deep in the mud of the path. It was warm, damp mud, seldom thoroughly dry.

The churchyard walls of rough stones had been built rather high but, with the years, they had sunk low into the spongy soil. It was possible leaving the track, to rest an arm on the wall while gazing over it at the grey Celtic crosses and the plain headstones quietly clustered there like the little quiet houses of the town. Two walls of the church were standing, the ivy thick on them. The rest was vanished as if it had never stood. Not a stone of it remained.

The track did not end at the church. It wound still downward and ended where it met the lake, locked in four shallow green slopes, and where a boat was beached.

Molly and Amiel did not follow the track to its end. They paused at the rusty plain little iron gate of the church upon which hung a padlock, long ago broken open and never mended. The deep sunshine of late summer which bathed them in warmth hung over the moist, lonely country like a mother's smile over a tearful child. The lake below the church was shining and, far to the north

the hulks of the mountains were thinnest gauze. The prevalent wind had fallen to a murmur through the grass, no louder than the movements of the cow pulling and chewing close upon the churchyard walls. Within the two walls of the church on the smooth, flat green, two very ancient headstones, one behind the other, stood. They looked like nothing so much as two black-clothed worshippers kneeling.

The sun's warmth was miraculous. Warmth embracing and pervading, sucking out ills, comforting and allaying—miraculous, all satisfying warmth! Amiel rested his right arm on the warm topmost stones of the wall. The sun's rays, direct on his back, seemed penetrating to the marrow of his spine, causing a tremor of delight.

Molly, heavy with her perplexities, thought the sunshine pleasant and the scene a charming one. She unlatched the little gate, and they wandered along a stretch of the mossy grass which divided the graveyard like a path, from the gate to the space between the ruined walls. She bent with idle curiosity over the two old gravestones, on which no writing was decipherable under the erasure of yellow moss. "There's not even a trace of graves," she said. The grass, level and empty, with the fatal mingling of moss, spread before the stones. At the foot of the foremost a cluster of purple orchis nestled. It was as though a hand had placed there a humble bouquet to the old dead.

Amiel took her arm. The touch so natural, the action of intimate companionship and confidence, gave her a sharp and angry little shock. It would have seemed to her much less strange if he had taken her in his arms.

"Let's sit here," she said. "The stone is quite warm.

You ought to rest before we walk back. It's only two days since you were in bed."

It was an oblong, horizontal tombstone on the border of the green path between the gate and the ruin. They watched a barelegged man and a boy down on the near shore of the lake pushing the boat into the water. He still held her arm.

"When are you going to tell me, Amiel?"

It was unpremeditated. It brought before them both the long three weeks of his illness. It also upset and bewildered him.

"You—you never asked me," he stammered.

"No. I didn't ask you. What did you imagine I've been thinking of all this time, never ceasing? And you—never another word, never a hint! You might have forgotten you'd told me anything. I waited till you were well, or at least better. But *how* much longer were you making us go on this silly way—as though everything had been told and nothing more needed to be said? Or rather as if nothing had been told."

"I thought, Molly," he said slowly in a tone reasonable but a little pleading, "that you'd heard enough. I made sure you didn't want to hear any more."

"Do you play the piano, Amiel?"

"Play the piano? No. How could I?"

"Then the room full of workmen—that was a fiction, too, was it? How am I to know the truth about you? Do you think I *enjoy* wondering, and not knowing in the least, whom I've married?"

He seemed to consider, glancing doubtfully at her. "What do you want to know?" he asked at last.

"Is there so much? That roomful of workmen—what

did you mean by that, Amiel? What are you looking at?" she asked sharply, the break in his attention rasping her. The size of his illness from a mere feverish chill had surprised and alarmed her. Throughout, he had never either voiced a requirement nor a complaint to her. "I should like to hear him swear and damn being ill on his honeymoon!" But she had never heard him. He had watched the door for her to come in. He would lie for a long time holding her hand. His recovery was languid and disinterested.

"I was looking at the boat," he answered. The man in the boat was casting a line. Molly's attention was not broken.

"You went back to Russia after your grandfather died?" she asked.

"Yes. I was twenty. My father had a house in Petersburg, and we spent the winter there."

"A magical city, it seems to me! Amiel, you and I will go there." Her imagination took her by assault and she was off on wide, snow-covered streets with sleigh bells ringing.

"Yes, it's very gay there. London is nothing to it. The State balls, you know, go on all the season. I enjoyed myself there more than I ever did in my life."

"You enjoyed the balls?"

"Wouldn't you?" he asked.

"They must be wonderful." But that was not what moved her to wonder. "Did you dance, Amiel?"

"Yes. We danced till it was morning. Then we drove in the sleighs out into the country, driving very fast while it was still dark. The horses seemed to fly."

"Oh, I can picture it," cried Molly. "And the Ballet, and the Opera, they're wonderful I know."

"Yes, you get very good music in Petersburg, better than at Munich. My father was very fond of music. He had his private orchestra. We held musical evenings at our house in Petersburg. Shall I tell you something funny?"

"Yes," she said, feeling a little dizzied.

"The first lecture at Lady Kitteredge's—it was all so like it—the platform, you know, and the piano. I lost where I was. I thought it was one of our evenings at my father's."

"You went to the piano, Amiel—I remember. I couldn't understand it. But—then *did* you play the piano?"

"Oh, yes," he said. "I studied in Edinburgh since I was eight, and when I was nineteen my grandfather let me be taken from the University and I went to Munich. I was there for a year until we went to Russia."

She was dumbfounded.

"But Amiel—music! I never guessed. I can't— Did you compose too?"

"Yes. In Petersburg I wrote for my father's orchestra. The first public performance of my work was on one of our evenings. Have you ever seen the ballet?"

"The Russian Ballet, you mean? I—"

"In Edinburgh I never went to a theatre. My grandfather wouldn't allow it. At Munich, though, I went to the opera. In Petersburg I went to the Ballet. Molly, what fish do you think they're getting out there?"

"Oh—trout, I expect. But Amiel—"

"Couldn't we buy some if they come in before we go home? Fresh trout is so delicious."

"Of course, if you like. But I want to hear, darling. It so amazes me. What happened when you went to the Ballet?"

"Will she cook them nicely, do you think?"

"Amiel!"

He looked at her and began to smile his wide youthful smile.

"Amiel, please!" She freed herself. "Not here, they can see us from the boat." She had watched him shrinking as if the world's eyes were on him, yet at times it seemed not to occur to him that people could be noticing. Only last night, he would have held her hand while Katie was in the room serving coffee, just as if he thought they were alone.

He had skipped a connexion when he began to speak again.

"The ballet I wrote was called *Fête de Glâce*. It was just a slight thing—one act. They produced it at the Marinsky before Tschaikovsky's *Belle au Bois Dormant*. It was some prince's birthday—a friend of my father's—they produced it as a compliment to him. The Imperial Family was there that night. After *Fête de Glâce* had been danced, someone introduced me to Vanya."

"Who was he?"

"His name was Krassotkin. He was a student at the University. There's not much more, Molly."

"I don't understand. You were great friends with this Vanya?"

She thought the question had spent itself in the air without reaching him. She often had this thought in conversation with him. But she was wrong. It had reached him, and Vanya was standing there on the grass before him, his hands purple because he had given his fur gloves to the crippled doorkeeper. "But my hands are not cold," he said. "They're quite warm, whatever their colour is. Amiel, you have an easeful nature. You have too many possessions for a composer."

"Yes," he said to Molly, "we were friends. He asked me to come to a house one evening and play to workmen—play Russian music to them. It was in the spring when the workmen begin to come in to Petersburg. The house was in the Alexander Nevsky Ward. It's sickening down there. There was a big room with a stove and benches, but the piano was a good one. Vanya saw to that."

"Wait!" she said. He waited, nesting his right elbow on his knee and his chin on his hand, in the attitude in which he had told of the snow burying the sledges. "Amiel, I want to hear, darling. But I'm afraid it must hurt you a lot to remember."

"Oh, no. Why should it?" Why he need never have been afraid of lifting the curtain! Who would be afraid to lift these stones and see the dead bones and dust? Everything was alive, and then it died; and that was a very peaceful thought. "I'm very happy this afternoon," he said impulsively to Molly.

"Did you write any more ballets?" she could not resist asking. The boat was slowly nosing towards the small island of the lake, the boy rowing. His red head bobbed up and down.

"I had never thought of writing a ballet. *Fête de Glâce* was just an experiment—it was nothing much. It more or less copied the style of Italian operatic ballets. But when I began to play Russian works to those people I thought of a ballet which would be much more really Russian than Tchaikovsky, or than anything I saw at the Marinsky. It would be called *The Night*, and the decor would be the Alexander Nevsky Ward, and the characters the workmen who came to the room. But Vanya didn't wish me to write a ballet. He said it was not my *genre*."

"Was Vanya a revolutionary, Amiel?"

"If you feel responsibility for a world of miserable, stupid people; if you descend to their world and live with them; and if you love them, and get furious with them, and try to teach them; and if they laugh at you, and if you are killed for them, then you are God. And God never tells them to kill.' Vanya said that."

"That's beautiful, Amiel. Do you believe it?"

"I remember it quite clearly. Some of them used to laugh at him, but I don't think he noticed. After I finished playing, he used to talk to them in Russian. I didn't know Russian then. I used to make notes for *The Night*. One night police raided the house, and Vanya and I and three of the others were arrested and sentenced to be shot."

"But you were not twenty-one, Amiel! You were a baby!"

"Well, yes," he assented. "I suppose I was a baby. I was young for my age, they always said."

"Your father—couldn't he have done something?"

"He knew better than to try too hard. He knew they dared take no risks with the Alexander Nevsky Ward. He knew they were right not to."

"But you were reprieved."

"Well," he said, "my mother was one of those energetic women. Besides she didn't understand the danger. She knew all my father's friends who were officials. She didn't give one of them an hour's peace until they got me somehow mercifully deported for life to Siberia. Vanya was shot."

"Your poor mother!" said Molly.

"She's dead."

"It must have killed her."

"They're both dead. Only my step-sister and brothers are left. In Russia, Molly, if you've ever been in prison it's marked on your passport. In fact everyone knows about it. My step-family are loyal Czarists, like my father was, and they naturally didn't want the stigma. So Katya was very pleased when she found the Kitteredges at Cannes."

"'Naturally didn't want—' Why they were beasts!" she cried.

"Well, as I've told you, they never were fond of me. Look, they're not bringing the boat in! They'll be too late for us to buy trout."

"Tell me one thing more, Amiel!"

He looked at her guardedly.

"How were you able to bear it? There must have been ways."

"Ways?"

"Of ending it if it was too awful."

"Oh. I see what you mean. Well, at Nertchinsk some did kill themselves. It wasn't very easy. Do you think you would, Molly?"

"How can I tell? I don't know what it was like. I can imagine circumstances in which I'd rather die than go on living."

"Can you?" he asked. His eyes opened wide and searched her face. "Katya couldn't," he muttered.

"What do you mean?" He did not reply. "Was there no hope of escaping?" She imagined that there must have been. She could see herself plotting escape.

"At Nertchinsk," he said out of his reflections, "where we were sent first—the silver mines are there, you know—well, a convict hid in the shaft one night in summer, and he got away. The next day they hunted him with the dogs.

The convicts who had behaved best were allowed to go, too, as a treat. The hunt lasted all day, but they brought him back. They don't care to lose prisoners there because of the work."

Molly turned her head, and read on the square headstone standing beside her, "Thaddeus Cuneen, Living and Dying in this Parish of Cullenstown, 1785-1866. Aged 81 years. Behold I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands."

"And the other place," she said, "what was it?"

"Verkhoyt."

She pulled up blades of grass and squeezed them in her hand.

"Was that worse?"

"Oh, there's no hard labour at Verkhoyt."

"What did you do there?"

"We kept warm."

"Was it possible to escape?"

"Oh, yes. Easy."

She asked, "Are you cold, Amiel?"

"No," he said. "To-day is real summer."

"We mustn't be out too late on your first walk." Twenty-one! "The ballet I wrote." "In the style of the Italian operatic ballets." "The Imperial family was there that night." "This afternoon," she thought, "I've been married. And to someone I've only just met." Thaddeus Cuneen and the two old tombstones were the witnesses. She thought of her bridegroom, his shining head and heavy brows, and his sudden whole-faced smile that had so much innocence. His face had every element of statuesque beauty. There was needed only cohesion of the elements which had been disintegrated by illness and suffering. His

face was no mask to him. It showed his every emotion, it never decently veiled them. It seemed to have no idea that it should.

And she had thought him lethargic, and lacking in self-control, insensitive and stupid! He would open his coat and waistcoat by the drawing-room fire. In a day he destroyed the shape of a new suit by lounging in it.

Molly was not religious, she had never regretted a church wedding. But she was deeply romantic and had her mysticism. In the sunshine warming the stones of the innocuous dead, she silently, with joy, took her marriage vows. Then and there she saw her life's significance. She had seen it dimly and obscurely. Now she saw it truly. She held out her arms to it. "I will give him to his music, and give it back to him!" Yes, he had suffered. At the most vital, the most formative stage of his development—at twenty-one—"But he will compose again. All the greater for the past. I will help him." She did not say "I will make it up to him."

Molly's blue eyes shone in the sun and her lips trembled. The grass she had pulled fell through her fingers.

"You're so beautiful, Molly!"

"So are you. So are you!" she whispered, kissing his lips. She never thought of the boat. She was fired with joy because she could not help it that she loved him; but now she could love him, not with pity, but triumphantly. He was worthy of her.

"Don't!" she said a little later, laying her hand across his face. "Take it off! Don't give me that look!" Of all his frank expressions this one, of some supplication, was the one she could not bear. "Never look at me like that again, my very dearest. If you knew how humble I feel to you!"

They strolled back to the gate along the green stretch dividing the gravestones.

"Amiel, perhaps you'll think it sounds strange, but in one way this day has been the very happiest of all to me. Because you've told me everything. You've taken me close to you, right into you. There's nothing between us now." They stood at the gate to look back at the two ivy-covered walls, and the two old tombstones, and at the crooked peasant stones, with the green path dividing.

"I shall always love this place. Oh, Amiel, what a sunset! Did you ever see such colours?" His right arm was round her, the other was in his pocket. No wonder he couldn't bear to look at that one! It would never play the piano again. "Do you know," she said shyly for, romantic as she was, she even now dreaded to give an impression of being sentimental, "I think I know why you went on living—why you never could have let yourself die. It was your music. It couldn't die, and so you couldn't."

"At Verkhoyt," said Amiel, staring over the wall at the graves, "I was dead. I was buried under the snow. You're looking frightened. I know it wasn't real. I thought I was dead and buried. It was the year before I got out."

She gazed at him.

"I ran out one night when it was snowing. I thought I died. The snow came down on me. I didn't know I was mad."

"How horrible! Oh, we're going to be happy!" She pressed closer in his arms. "Amiel," she suddenly asked it, "was that when you lost your fingers?"

He looked roused. "I think you spoke just now," he said. "Did you ask me something?"

"I asked you if that was the time you lost your fingers?"

"I was out in a blizzard once, and they froze. If it had been for longer I would have died."

The man and the redheaded boy were pulling the boat out of the water and up the grass. Their unhurried heaving in unison suggested to Molly the rhythmic movements of a dance—"a new sort of folk ballet." She turned laughing to draw his attention. His face was towards the ruined walls and the graves.

"If we wave to them," he said, "they might wait for us, and we'll get our trout!"

CHAPTER VII

"It's not that I don't understand, Amiel. I do, perfectly, darling. But you'll admit yourself that it's a morbid feeling. It won't do to give in to it altogether. You'll never get over it that way."

"Is that why you asked them?" he inquired, without looking up.

"Well, he's been very nice to us, you know, while you were ill. I thought we might have him just once. You should have seen the pleasure it gave him! Besides," she went on, more honestly, "we shan't be able to live *all* our lives alone with each other, now shall we? The time will come when we'll have to include people. Look on poor Dr. and Miss O'Reilly as nothing more than a little bit of practise, darling, for that inevitable time. After all, it's not as if they're a dinner party." And she laughed and waited. "Of course, if you're going to sulk!" she said with a measure of calculated scorn which puzzled him.

"I'm not sulking."

"Then you'll come up and dress, not to be late to-night." She lightly kissed his temple, whispering, "I like people to meet my husband."

She had been prepared for more difficulty with him so that, honest though she was, it had seemed wisest to give her invitation without consulting him. But in fact he had no thought of protesting. He had lost the trick.

"Amiel! That's not allowed!" She ran her hand over

his face. "Don't—please don't look so—so *stupid*, darling. You're the master here. Yes, you are," she said ardently. "This is your house as much as it's mine (As much as it's either of ours!) If you don't want the O'Reillys to come to-night, Terry shall go on the pony straight away with a note saying that you don't feel well enough, but that some other night—what's making you smile? Is something funny?" But she did not wait for him to tell her. "It will be rather sad for the O'Reillys," she said. "It's such an excitement for the poor things. I imagine they don't often go out to dinner."

"It will be a party," he said, looking up at her.

"Well, no. Not exactly a party."

"Yes. Our first party." She watched the heavy submission, that made him look stupid, clear and lift from his face. His smile came slowly. "What are we giving them to eat?" he asked, leaning his head back to look up at her again.

She told him. "I believe that after all you're not so cross with me for asking them!"

"Why shouldn't you ask them? I love a party," he murmured, and took her hand and played with it. "Yes, I love a party. I think, Molly, I'm excited. Why shouldn't it be fun?" His eyes wistfully questioned her. "It will be fun, won't it?"

"I think it will be rather fun. I shall pity poor Miss O'Reilly trying to flirt with you."

He breathed the faint perfume of jasmine as she bent above him, sitting on the arm of his chair. He turned and pressed his face, closing his eyes, into the softness between her neck and shoulder.

Dr. O'Reilly arrived in his trap, a little early, accom-

panied by his daughter. Her appearance upset Molly's expectation of Miss O'Reilly. Her father had not mentioned her age. He had pleaded his daughter's anxiety to meet Mr. Gilchrist, but it was obvious that his sole and irresistible motive was to show her off. Clearly he thought the world of her. She was a lank child of twelve whose two long black tails of hair were tied with a huge bow of white ribbon below each ear. Her dress was a hideous tartan, under which a white calico petticoat edged with lace showed. She wore black woollen stockings and bronze dancing slippers with crossed elastic. Her father introduced her by a name which sounded like Eva.

"Coming on in the trap," he said, gazing fondly at her, "she says to me, 'Daddy, did you know Mrs. Peary was the first white woman to go on an Arctic expedition?' I did not, I told her. Sure I haven't the half of her knowledge. But Mr. Gilchrist will be able to answer all your questions now, Aoife. It's a great evening for her, so it is!"

Molly watched her husband greet their guests. The morbid self-consciousness that had deformed him in London was absent. It was no more than a slight shyness which added a charm to his exotic fairness and his erased and disintegrated beauty. She saw what seemed to her the echo, or the remnants, of a winning, natural, and friendly social grace, and her heart leaped and ached for him. She sent him a little smile.

When the gong sounded, the doctor stood up and bowed with immense gallantry before her, offering his arm. With another little irrepressible smile she swept off with him. Aoife and Amiel were left looking at each other. For the moment Amiel did nothing else but look. She was equal to the occasion. She approached and laid her fingers on the

arm of the hand in his pocket. They were small and brown and very strong fingers. An ink stain on the second finger was partially obliterated by pumice-stone.

"How old are you?" he asked softly.

"I'm twelve. But I shall be thirteen to-morrow. To-morrow's my birthday."

"You look more than that."

"I'm tall for my age," she answered composedly.

"Dr. O'Reilly beside me," said Molly gaily. "And Amiel, you'll take care of Eva." Elation at the success of her plan shed an extra brilliance over her. Amusement at her company kept bubbling up in a vivacity which made the atmosphere effervescent and as stimulating to the doctor as champagne.

"It's not Eva her name is, Mrs. Gilchrist. It's Aoife. There's an Irish name for you. Wait till she tells you how it's spelt."

"A, O, I, F, E. Pronounced Efa," said Aoife crisply.

Molly mentioned the ruined church and the doctor told her it was still in use for interments, both Catholic and Protestant. "And that's a queer thing for you, that they're together in it. You'd have noticed that the churchyard's divided through the middle. The Catholics are on your left as you go through the gate, and the Protestants on your right, and there's No Man's Land in the middle." The Church of Ireland rector of Cullenstown "the Reverend Heggan," was, he informed them, a peculiar sort of a fella. "Great ideas on educating, he has. You'd enjoy a talk with him, Mrs. Gilchrist."

Molly glanced down the table and saw Amiel watched attentively by Aoife as he used his right hand only. He looked really distinguished in evening dress. No one could

guess the discomfort she knew it caused him. How was she ever deceived into taking his face for that of a man of action?

Molly was wearing a peacock blue moiré dress which fitted her closely, leading in an unbroken line up to her wonderful shoulders and her throat, and her golden hair drawn up austere to the crown of her head where the bunched curls shone in the candlelight. She was at ease and enjoying herself, always at her best in company. An exquisite colour shone in her cheeks. To the doctor her presence was a challenge. He was spurred to outdo himself in amusing and pleasing her. This was not in any sense from vanity, for no man had a more modest opinion of himself. His homage to her was to show at his best to her.

Amiel, too, could not take his eyes off her. He had never seen anyone more beautiful than she was to-night. She met his frankly absorbed and fascinated gaze, and her colour became more vivid. Dr. O'Reilly was telling a story about an old woman, one of his patients, and a box of white ointment. " 'Good morning, Mrs. Birney,' I says to her, 'and how is the leg? Did the ointment clear it up all right?' 'Oh, it did, doctor,' says she. 'It did indeed, and thank you kindly. Sure, doctor,' she says, 'there's a wonder of healing in that ointment. It's better than holy water. I have a pain in my tooth this long while and when I seen what the blessed ointment done for the sore on my shin, I'm after rubbing a lick of it over my tooth, and *divil* a kick out of that tooth's since!' If that's not faith for you!" The doctor's hearty laughter causing his napkin to fall off his knee, he dived after it. Molly formed with her lips at Amiel, "Talk!" Then became aware of Aoife attentive to the procedure, and began to speak vivaciously: "I've

never seen anything anywhere like the way the country people live here. The primitiveness! But Amiel says it reminds him of peasants on the big Russian estates—don't you, Amiel?"

"Well, now," the doctor said, "that's what this fella—this Protestant fella I was telling you about—complains of. Fourteenth-century minds, he says, along with sixth-century habits. Educate the mind, he says, and you change the habits. He's all for starting a Reading Circle in the Protestant dance hall—that's the little bit of a tin shed in the corner of Cassidy's field as you're going towards the town, you may have passed it. The Catholic dance hall is two fields off, in O'Connor's patch next up to the bog, and the sheds as like as two peas. Heggan—that's the rector—is for mixing the Catholics with the Protestants in the Reading Circle. The Protestants like the idea no better than the Catholics. It's my belief that Heggan's not long for this parish. But the priest is against the Reading Circle entirely, for fear would it put ideas into their heads. Do you say the people are as ignorant in Russia as we have them in this country, Mr. Gilchrist?"

"If I owned a property here," said Amiel, "I'd use my influence to have that man deported for spreading sedition."

"Heggan, is it?" exclaimed the doctor.

Molly was so taken aback by this obedience to her injunction that she didn't say a word. The ponderous, official phrase "deported for spreading sedition"! He must be joking.

The doctor's husky, breathy laughing was a long business. He got the most out of a laugh. "Ah, we'll wait till poor Heggan gets a bit more seditious before we deport

him. It's decent homes for them that interest him at present, more than Home Rule."

"Isn't he afraid?" exclaimed Amiel.

"This isn't Russia, Amiel," said Molly, at the same time that the doctor said, "Then you're not for reforms, Mr. Gilchrist?"

"The priest's right. He's afraid to give them ideas. He's right. And this man wants to give them self-respect. Doesn't he know how frightful that is? The most terrible thing is a peasant's self-respect. Do you allow that man? He ought to be sent to Siberia. He—"

"Amiel!"

His excitement was incredible to her. Flannery and Katie stood silent and stiff as pokers at the sideboard. Amiel looked at her when she spoke, but his high excitement was not controlled.

"You pity them in their filth in the cottages. Molly does. She thinks that if they were washed, and their diseases cured, they'd be just like she is. Have you watched them enjoying themselves in their own way? They *enjoy* being filthy. It is enjoyable, too. They don't envy you your clean pleasures. Do you know a story, Molly, about a box, and a devil is in it, and he keeps crying, 'Let me out!' And they're sorry for him and they open the box. That's what they're doing in Russia. They're letting the devils out. You can pity them when you're the strongest. When they're strong, they don't pity. And when they have self-respect—you can only be frightened to death of them then."

The chocolate-ice pudding was Amiel's favourite. His eyes would light up at the sight of it. His eyes were bright now in his livened face, but they did not see the pudding

held at his elbow. Flannery with some solicitude discreetly drew his attention. He lifted the spoon, but his hand trembled, and pettishly he let the spoon fall back and pushed the dish away.

The doctor ate hastily, always finishing his helping before anyone, for he hardly ever had time for his meals. He never noticed what he ate. Molly took a little pudding, but she found herself no longer wanting to eat anything.

"You sound very stupid, darling. I don't believe you can be serious. You can't deny that it's the people who know them best, like Mr. Heggan, who are always the keenest to help them, and the most optimistic about trying."

His eyes were wide open in the soft light of the candles on the table. She had not often thus encountered their full gaze unveiled by his heavy eyelids or by the glasses. They looked dark and shocked. They stared slowly at the table, at his wife and his guests, and then up sideways at the wall, where the oil-portrait of Molly's great-uncle hung. "I've got no pudding!" he exclaimed. "Did I eat it?"

The doctor was accustomed to arguments where the parties became, as he would have said, emphatic. You couldn't have an argument without emphasis. It only grew interesting when the parties began, in a friendly way, to warm up. He said with genial interest. "And so you'd as soon stay on the top, and keep them underneath you a while longer, Mr. Gilchrist! I don't know but more would agree with you there than would care to be heard saying so. But what Heggan is after with the Reading Circle you couldn't call a reform. I asked him what the devil he *was* after with it, seeing the half of them can't read, and he tells me it's to put beauty into their lives."

"Why?" asked Amiel blankly.

"Augh—you'll have to talk to him to hear that. And talking of him reminds me of one time when Heggan was in the pulpit—this'll make you laugh—"

"Does he think they want beauty? These lakes and green country are pretty. Can he give them more beauty than that?" His spoon fell with a clatter. "In beautiful places the horrible things go on, and the people are more horrible than anywhere. Instead of saying, 'The most beautiful place in the world,' you could say, 'The place where the worst things happen.'"

"Amiel, there's no need to get excited," said Molly. He flung himself back in the chair. "And it's foolish, too. You can't deny the influence for beauty of poetry and music in people's lives, can you?"

"That seems to be Heggan's idea," said the doctor, "so far as I understand him at all."

"They go," muttered Amiel, "every night to the opera." His voice muttered away.

"What's that you said, Mr. Gilchrist?"

Molly did not ask. Amiel, lying back, made a restless movement because his stiff collar was irking him. They could hear his breathing. The doctor repeated, "I didn't catch that, Mr. Gilchrist."

"I heard, Daddy," said Aoife reprovingly, and eating a pear. "Mr. Gilchrist said, 'And they send them to Siberia.'"

"The composer of the opera didn't think of that," said Molly eagerly. "And if he did—if he does—find his creative ideal at war with the world, he may lose faith in the world but not in his ideal."

"There've been quite a lot of musicians mad," Aoife informed them. She was eating her pear primly with her

knife and fork. "There was Schumann. He kept hearing the note A sounding in his ears. Did you know that, Mr. Gilchrist?"

The doctor was a little out of his depths. Seizing on the cue of madness, he speedily launched into the epic of the only non-political murder Cullenstown had known. It had happened in '82, thirty years ago, but nothing dies in Ireland. Memory of the murder by Terence—"Red Man"—Mooney of his brother's wife, in the cottage in the bog they all three shared, was as live as if it had happened yesterday. Twenty-seven years ago the cottage, in a fit of mingled religious outrage and superstition, had been burnt to the ground.

"Red Man's" sweetheart, a girl of twenty, had throughout clung to him consistently, though the murdered woman had been her elder sister. The spectacle of her loyalty had so moved the Dublin jury, it was said, that they brought in the verdict Guilty but Insane. "Red Man" was taken from the court to the asylum where he spent the rest of his life. His sweetheart removed from Cullenstown to where she could be near him, and she visited him for two hours every Saturday afternoon until he died. She never married.

"And there was the apple of a wife lost to some fella! A woman who could forgive a man that and stick to him through the consequences—Isn't it a sin she was wasted on a lunatic! I heard he was a lunatic at the end, whatever he was in the beginning."

"That was certainly love," said Molly thoughtfully.

"And her own sister, mind you! Pushed down in a bog hole. They'll show you the place yet. They'll tell you it's haunted by the ghost of her, dripping wet and calling."

"Did he have red hair?"

"What a question, Amiel!"

" 'Red Man,' is it? I never saw him myself, but I wouldn't wonder if his hair gave him the name they put on him."

"Perhaps she loved him for that." He was lying back in an easy attitude, an attitude rather too easy for the head of his table. Molly suddenly saw him as an undergraduate at ease in someone's study, the air heavy and intimate with pipe smoke, while he tranquilly, but zestfully, entered the ethical discussion on What is Woman's Love?

"Now that's interesting. That's an interesting point. You're suggesting that she loved him for his hair being the colour it was, more than she might be taken to hate him for pushing her sister in the hole. That it wasn't what you might call a moral love. Then on your hypothesis, Mr. Gilchrist, what becomes of the great sacrifices for love? Where's woman's divine faculty of forgiveness (as they say) if you're right that any woman will abandon her standards of good and bad for the colour a man's hair is, and for that alone?"

"I never heard anything—" began Molly. She stopped, conscious of Aoife munching away at her second pear. The doctor followed her glance. The argument for him was purely hypothetical. He was torn between his interest in it and his embarrassment at the discussion of such a topic, above all at the dinner table and in a lady's company.

But it wasn't often that he had the opportunity to enjoy a metaphysical argument on any subject, unless on an evening now and then at the Rectory with his Protestant friend, Heggan. He reminded himself that Society in London had different ideas from those in practice at Cullens-town.

"Aoife," he said, "do you understand what we're saying?"

"You're saying about the murder, daddy," she said, her bright eyes fixed on him.

"Well, you're not to listen to us. Do you mind me now? You can repeat your poetry over to yourself—you'd better let me see your lips moving. A great head for poetry she has, Mr. Gilchrist, it'd surprise you! So then, you'd say if I understand you, that the sentiments of Tom Moore in the lines:—'I know not, I care not, if something—' how's this it goes, Aoife?"

"'Guilt' daddy," said Aoife. A mouthful of pear impeded her. She chewed it steadily and swallowed it. "'I know not, I care not, if guilt's in that heart. I but know that I love thee whatever thou art.'" she said glibly.

"You'd say then, would you, Mr. Gilchrist, that the sentiment of those lines would be inspired by a physical passion and not by any divine, or as we like to think it whatever our own experiences may have been, womanly compassion? You'd say simply that her reasoning powers were, for the time, in abeyance?"

"I think Aoife and I will have a discussion of our own in the drawing-room," said Molly, rising. She found the conversation intolerable. Amiel rose a moment after the doctor and opened the door for them.

He took out his silver cigarette case, which Lady Kitter-edge had given him, and held it towards the doctor. It was no gesture of casual habit. It seemed an impulse of liking and friendliness, without which the case might not have been offered, and this gave it a peculiar charm to which the doctor responded warmly. He might have a soul below good food, but he smoked wistfully to console himself for

the drink he craved. He preferred cigarette to pipe smoking.

"That must be a special brand you have there. I never smoked one of these yet."

"Yes, they're Russian. Take some if you like them."

"Ah no, now, I wouldn't deprive you. No, no, indeed I won't. Well, it's very good of you. I'll enjoy these cigarettes. I'll keep them to smoke for a treat."

"They're a treat when you've starved for them," said Amiel.

"You'd be out of reach of them, I suppose, for many a day, would you? I never did much travelling myself." They sat in silence. The doctor contemplated his companion as he was shadowed and revealed by the candle-light, his contemplation finding other things perhaps than Molly's had looked for. But it broke on him that their companionable silence had become strained. His host was under some strain. He saw pinheads of sweat pushing out on the monumental forehead. However, far from desisting in his scrutiny, this deepened the doctor's speculative gaze.

"You've been mighty ill, I think, Mr. Gilchrist. I'm not meaning this last little attack."

"Very ill." The man's voice was almost gone.

At last the doctor, aware of the wretched embarrassment his scrutiny was causing, removed it and looked at the table. "You're dropping your ash."

Amiel's shaking hand laid his cigarette in the ashtray.

"It pulled you down a bit, didn't it?"

"I'm very strong."

"Strong, are you?"

"Very strong."

"Do you sleep well at night, Mr. Gilchrist?"

"Like a child. I never move all night. But you know this

is my honeymoon." And at what the greenish, whispering lips formed next, the doctor did not chuckle. Indeed it considerably shocked him in connexion with the beautiful and gracious woman who had left them. He looked again and saw the face as it might be in twenty years—coarse and fleshy.

"A queer fella!" He waved back the decanter which his host pushed towards him. It was port such as he rarely got, but it wouldn't do to take any chances. When they returned to the drawing-room, Molly and Aoife were engaged with a game of draughts which they had fetched from a drawer in the morning-room, and Amiel's lips had recovered their normal slight colour.

"They teach her to dance up at the Convent," the doctor sipped his coffee, viewing his daughter. "What's this dance they're teaching her now—what's your new dance, Aoife?"

"The Ribbon Dance, daddy. I've told you."

"Come on with you now, give us a couple of steps—show us how it goes! She's a grand little dancer, she is really."

"I haven't the ribbons. It's your move, Mrs. Gilchrist. I do hate these interruptions when one's trying to play."

"Can't you take off that belt that's round your waist and make a ribbon of it?"

"There's no music, daddy." Her grimace at Molly was of irritated, adult patience at a child's pertinacity.

"I'll whistle you a tune," he said.

"Oh, all *right* if you want it." Muttering, "Some people are never satisfied," she unbuckled her patent-leather belt and held it stretched above her head while she commenced a painstaking gavotte step left and right to her father's husky whistling of "The Irish Washerwoman."

"You are a fool, daddy. I can't dance it to that."

"Can you not? Well, how about this for you?" And he began, "Believe me if all those endearing young charms," lowering the pitch in the middle.

In vain Molly tried to catch Amiel's eye to silence him. His yells of laughter were unrestrained. He rolled about as he lay on the sofa and two of its cushions fell. Aoife regarded him with cold scorn.

"Your stud's come out." Giving the stud into his free hand, she bent and pinched the skin of his wrist in a surreptitious, practised nip between her thumb and first finger nail. He sobered slowly and they stared into each other's eyes. She waggled the pinch more painfully, her eyes, solemn and unflinching.

"She recites too, do you know. She has a memory for poetry you'd be surprised at. Come on and give us the piece you learnt last at school, Aoife. She goes to school up at the Convent, did I tell you?"

Aoife stood erect, gave a curtsey so brief as to seem a genuflexion, and folded her hands in front of her:

*"I have a little shadow
That goes in and out with me.
And what can be the use of him
Is more than I can see."*

Her delivery was scratchy, forbidding, and disinterested.

"That's sweet. Thank you, Aoife. Amiel, do you think Dr. O'Reilly could tell us the history of the Celtic cross in the garden? We're always wondering—"

"It's not school alone where she'll be reading poetry. She reads it at home to herself out of her books. Sure she has it by heart by the gross. Let's have the piece you told me

yesterday evening, Aoife! By Mangan it was. It'll interest Mr. Gilchrist, didn't you say, being about the parts where he does his exploring."

"It's a nice one," said Aoife. She folded her hands again, without the curtsy. "'Siberia.' By James Clarence Mangan," she said incisively:

*"In Siberia's wastes
The ice-wind's breath
Woundeth like the toothed steel.
Lost Siberia doth reveal
Only blight and death.*

*"Blight and death alone!
No summer sun shines:
Night is interblent with day:
In Siberia's wastes, alway
The blood blackens, the heart pines.*

*"In Siberia's wastes
No tears are shed,
For they freeze within the brain.
Nought is felt but dullest pain;
Pain acute, yet dead.*

*"Pain as in a dream,
When years go by
Funeral-paced, yet fugitive;
When man lives and doth not live,
Doth not live—nor die.*

*"In Siberia's wastes
Are sands and rocks.
Nothing blooms of green or soft,
But the snow-peaks rise aloft,
And the gaunt ice-blocks.*

*"And the exile there
Is one with those;
They are part, and he is part!
For the sands are in his heart,
And the killing snows."*

The bright black eyes fixed her audience full of horror. Her voice deepened. It was as though a penny whistle should attempt a requiem:

*"Therefore in those wastes
None curse the Czar.
Each man's tongue is cloven by
The North Blast, who heweth nigh
With sharp scimitar.*

*"And such doom each dress,
Till, hunger-gnawn
And cold-slain, he at length sinks there;
Yet scarce more a corpse than ere
His last breath was drawn."*

"Wasn't Mangan a fine poet for you! If that's the truth we've been hearing about the place, you're well out of it, Mr. Gilchrist. Those are fine roses you have in the bowl there." No one put flowers in the doctor's house since his wife died. He never really missed them, yet he loved flowers and grew them. " 'Nothing blooms of green or soft.' Those words are the worst of the picture to my thinking."

"It's not true," said Amiel. Lying on the sofa, he spoke with vivacity, almost effusiveness. "In the north, in the Yeneisisk, in summer—you ought to see it. You never saw such flowers! The ground is a mass of them. The colours make you think the flowers anywhere else have no colours. It's the most beautiful place I ever saw in my life."

The evening passed. Dr. O'Reilly, as he might have petitioned St. Joseph to refer his requests, humbly disclaiming direct appeal to the Almighty, now asked Mr. Gilchrist to persuade his wife to sing. But she did not sing. The piano was out of order, she said. She was looking a little pale. The lovely glow at dinner had faded out. "She's indoors a great deal lately while her husband was ill," the doctor thought, and when he was saying goodbye he asked her if she hunted. She loved it, she said.

"Thanks to the weather they're sending us, they've started the cubbing already. It's not what you're used to in England. We're more free and easy, if you understand me. But I can promise you some grand riding, Mrs. Gilchrist, if you'd care to come out along with them. Would to-morrow suit you?"

"To-morrow?" Orange had packed her habit. "One might as well be with a thing, Miss Molly, as without." "But I've no mount," said Molly laughing. "There's only the old piebald pony, and the carriage horse."

"The carriage horse will carry you. 'Twouldn't be his first time out. Your uncle hunted him two days each week till the rheumatism disabled him. That horse will see worse than himself in the field, I can tell you. I've warned you we're not what you're used to. The pony I have beyant in the trap is what I'll be up on myself. He hasn't the go of some of them, but he knows what I'm doing better than I know it myself, sure he'll do everything for the best. Will I call for you to-morrow morning and take you on? Does your husband ride?"

"I used to," said Amiel.

"Ah, well, we haven't the time for everything."

"I'll come," said Molly suddenly.

"It'll do you good, Mrs. Gilchrist."

"I believe it will."

She gave him her hand. To kiss Aoife would not have been natural to her. Besides the child was not one you kissed.

"To-morrow then, Dr. O'Reilly."

"To-morrow at eight, please God! There's winter in the air to-night. You've had the best of the summer. Winter's early on us up here, and then there's fog, wind and rain without ceasing till we're in spring."

Amiel was first in bed to-night. He lay watching her as she sat at the dressing-table brushing her hair. As the brush lifted it the candle-light made it glitter. It entranced him. He waited to have her in his arms—yet he wished her to go on brushing her hair while he dreamily watched her. She spoke into the mirror.

"I thought you needn't have talked the way you did at dinner, Amiel, trying to shock Dr. O'Reilly. It was very bad taste and rather silly of you."

"Do you want to talk about him? I want you to come into bed."

Molly saw the cool, concealing mask of her face in the mirror. She laughed. "Idiot!" she said to it. She blew out the dressing-table candles and stepped to the side of the bed, standing above him in the firelight and the light of the candle burning by the bed. "Which is it?" she smiled and murmured. "Your hair? or your long, long eyelashes? or your yellow eyes?" She touched his hair and his eyelids and lashes with a soft, fragrant finger.

"No," he mumbled. "You'll begin to think, 'What's wrong about him? He's not like ordinary people.' People we meet—you'll see it in their faces. You'll see them look at

me—" His breath caught. "Put the candle out," he said, the light showed him exhausted. "Come to bed."

"Amiel!"

Painfully he raised his eyelids. He saw the stately, innocent, alluring, confident creature. She wore a rose-coloured satin nightdress with small puffed sleeves, through which narrow white ribbon patterned with rosebuds was threaded. Incredulously she saw his inimical resentment and his recoil from her. Once before she had caught such a look of his. It was when she had rated him for throwing the Sèvres cherub. But that had been only derision.

"If you were someone," he said, with that look, "pert, stupid, and not very pretty, with only one lot of clothes, and nothing to sleep in, with no sapphire earrings—then a difference between me and the people you knew might not, you know—might not be a wrong one. And then you might die for my hair—"

"I don't understand you. I think you're being odious."

She blew out the candle. They lay in the vast bed, and Molly was too proud to move close to him. But he was not proud.

"Hold me, Molly, hold me!"

"Amiel, what is it? Is it a nightmare?"

"Don't let me go!"

Now she took his stricken body into her arms, feeling under his silk pyjamas the roughnesses of his old scars, long healed over.

"The first snow," he articulated, "it's falling there."

"But you're not there, my own love. You're not there."

"It's the only place in the world where I should be."

CHAPTER VIII

So crisp and trim in her riding habit she paused, with rare indecision, on her way to the door.

Her indecision was whether or not she wished him to wake up before she was gone. While she dressed, neither noisily nor especially quietly, he had not stirred. She wondered at his sleep so violently disturbed and now so profound. "He looks as if he could never move again." In this suspension of his troubled existence no past, present nor future existed. He lay in a tumbled attitude, his body curved round and his face upturned—and there was the statue's face perfect. Deep repose had knit all the elements together. She gazed and gazed at its heavy beauty. He looked very young. But, kissing him, she thought of the scars, so long healed over, yet they would never vanish. Her warm lips pressing did not wake him.

The mist of early autumnal mornings hung amber and tenuous, and out of doors her spirits rose. Her night-self—assailed, and acquainted with horror—loosened its clinging and she shook it off. Its sufferings were old tortures and martyrdoms read in her childhood and now re-experienced; miseries and injustices in the world, but far irrelevant to her own world; imaginations of darkness beyond the light. She kept her night-self a secret from everyone, and had done so since her childhood.

The indeterminate chestnut horse which drew the trap and carriage was grotesquely unequal to her trim perfection.

"Shall I get an ounce of pace out of him, Terry?"

"You will, ma'am. It'd surprise you. You'll be holding him in. Sure he knows well what you're wanting with him."

She took breaths of the pure, lively air. "The house is stuffy," she thought. "It's too full of things, they take up the air. Oh, Amiel!" But when he should be strong again they would ride together. It would easily come back to him. The bright fingers of sun delved into the mist. "I believe I need this. Good morning, Dr. O'Reilly! It's going to be glorious. Who wouldn't be alive on a morning like this?"

Amiel's sleep thinned. It frayed into dreams. He clung to it and strove to sink as a fish on the line will dive and dive for the kind, blind depths. "Don't talk to me!" he pleaded tearfully aloud. "I can't hear you. No, no—I don't hear you. I'm dead." But it was dissolving. "Ages and ages dead. Buried." It was daylight. It must be spring. "Damn you, Pashka, damn you, let me alone! I want to sleep." He lay for a long time: "Molly!" he whispered. Smiling, his eyes closed, he gently groped his hand along the sheet. She was not beside him. He opened his eyes. She was gone. She had left him. He burst into tears.

"Do you want anything, sir?" Orange paused uncertainly outside the door.

"Where is she?"

"Mrs. Gilchrist, sir?"

"Where is she?"

"You've forgotten, sir. She's gone cubbing this morning." There was no answer.

"Can I do anything for you, sir?"

She waited before she shook her head, continuing a little heavily, along the passage. She was getting old.

Amiel lay on. The upset had left him languid and there was no Molly to say when they should get up. If he could drown in a pleasant stupor while the hours slid by! But the air beyond him was too warm. It weighed nothing. Orange had drawn back the curtains, and the light of the windows burned through his eyelids.

He lay, dismayed and shuddering to feel the feeble restlessness that would not let him lie. He shrank and fought it. It was twelve when he got up. In his bath he lay voluptuously contented. The room was heavy with steam. He turned the tap again to feel the stream of new warmth embrace him. Molly didn't like him to stay in the bath. She would call to him, "Are you thinking of getting out of that bath to-day, darling?" That was his body, really his. He felt heavy with it. Across the left breast ran a broad shiny red mark. "How ugly it is," he thought.

Flannery was waiting in the dressing-room.

"It's a spirited day, sir. Will you be going out?"

"Will you be going out, Flannery?"

"I might then, sir. Will you have the grey suit?"

Molly had not returned. The folded newspaper and the post lay on the hall table. He passed them without glancing. They did not concern him. "What's for lunch?" he wondered.

The two dogs followed him after lunch into the smoking-room where a small fire had been lit. Sunbeams chased across the carpet and pictures, as the clouds caught them and let them go. The breeze had strengthened and was racing clouds across the pale blue; the garden, and the swaying flowers were now in light and now in shade. Swallows were active. A world of activity. He turned slowly from the window, back into the quiet room. He pulled the

green curtains across the window. They were long and heavy and shut out the light. He took turf sods from the bucket, and made up the fire. The room was quite dark, only for the glow of the fire. He lay down on the fender-seat, and as the room grew hot, he took off his coat and then his waistcoat. He lit a cigarette. The dogs nuzzled him. He caressed them and they licked his face. All three lay dozing, drugged with heat and food.

He roused to hear the clock chime four.

The fire had burnt down leaving him cold. He put on his waistcoat and lifted Frank off his coat. Katie brought tea in, but he had eaten too much at lunch and he could not touch the sandwiches and scones. He fed Frank and Lucy who were torpid, and dazed with heat.

Throwing his cigarette away, he wandered into the hall to watch for Molly. From beyond the door that led to the servant's quarters far below, he heard bursts of laughter. He was drawn to the door. They were having good fun down there. Were they playing cards? There would be seven of them if Connolly and Terry came in for their tea. A louder burst came. He felt a violent shiver and drew away from the door.

In the dark firelit room, he was alone. He could not believe it. The thought made him hold his head in his hands. "Alone," he said.

Molly had left him. One day she would certainly leave him for ever. If Ippolit had left the shaft sooner he might have outdistanced the dogs. "The doctor's so very decent," she said. A decent man. "I shall get drunk," Amiel thought.

"Dr. O'Reilly has called, sir. Will I show him in?"

"Is she with him?"

"She's not, sir." Katie must think he had fallen asleep in the dark.

"Is that yourself, Mr. Gilchrist? You have the blinds drawn early. Jesus, you've it close in here! Is your wife home?"

"No, she's not come back."

"Will I bring the lamps, sir?" said Katie.

"I don't know. No. We don't want the light. Come into the dining-room, doctor. You're right, its filthy in here."

"They had one good run and a short one. I'd to drop out in the middle of the third for twins arriving early in one of the cottages. I thought I'd drop in on my way home and find how Mrs. Gilchrist enjoyed it. She's grand on a horse. The old horse wasn't up to her but there was many a worse than himself in the field, as I promised her. She got the best I ever saw out of him. Well she might, and the old imp as proud as a peacock to be carrying her! Well, I'll not stay for her, much as I'd like to. I've the trap waiting. Listen to this—we've a birthday party on at home, and if I'm late by two minutes, though there were twins born in every cottage in the place, I'd catch it hot from the hostess."

"You've time for a drink," said Amiel, "before you need hurry."

"I've five minutes for a drink then, if you're having one yourself?"

"Yes, I'm having one. Come into the dining-room. We'll drink all there is."

Under such demonstrative friendliness the doctor warmly expanded. A naïve boisterousness in his host's hospitality excited him.

"Yes, it's Miss Aoife's thirteenth birthday. A very distinguished party she's holding for it. You should see the

dinner-table! There'll be herself at the head and myself at the foot, and there'll be twelve places laid round. She's written out the name cards to be put in each of them. Ah, not too full, Mr. Gilchrist—you're a terrible fellow; you'll be making a toper out of me. Yes, I'll sit down to dinner to-night with Lucrezia Borgia on the one side of me, and Saint Elizabeth of Hungary on the other, and that's a position would tax a French diplomat—aren't they said to be the handiest at their job?"

He slowly relished his whiskey.

"This is grand stuff you have. Ah, you're too bad! At this rate I'll be hiccuping the halo off St. Francis of Assisi, besides showing disrespect to Parnell. So your wife's left you alone, has she?"

"Yes. Alone."

"Ah, well, don't let it drive you to drink. That's what I took to when my wife died and left me to myself, it's six years since. It helped me forget, I'll say that for it. To forget that and everything else."

"Well, we can't ask more, can we?"

"So your wandering days are over, are they? I'd have liked to travel. I once got as far as Cherbourg in a pleasure boat from Brighton. That was on my honeymoon. No, thank you, man! I know when I'm safe. Not another drop for me. I'm to be home by seven and into my dress clothes for the occasion. She's very firm about that. Well, if you put it that way! I'll tell you a queer thing, will I? I could refuse you as easy as wink, I could. I could say, 'No more, thank you, Mr. Gilchrist,' and I could get up from the table and walk out to the trap. It'd be no trouble to me more than that. If it cost me an effort now, I might make the effort. But again maybe I wouldn't. I'll take one more

glass, to show there's no ill-feeling, but let it stop at the one.

"It's a mighty peculiar thing—have you thought the same?—how the lives of two fellas will dilvulge—diverge. Take yourself and myself. I've stayed in Ireland my whole life—never been out of it only for my honeymoon, and a holiday I took one summer on the Isle of Man. That must seem a queer thing to you. You'd not understand it, would you?

"How many is that I've had? Whatever it is, it's one too many. I'll need all the fresh air I can swallow between here and home if I'm to make my court bow without disgracing myself to Queen Bloody Mary. 'I've asked her because I like her name, daddy,' I'm told by Miss Aoife. 'Post me up in their careers for God's sake,' said I, 'the way I'll know what to be talking to them about.' It's surprising what her head holds of history, Mr. Gilchrist. I'm often surprised at it. Is that clock right? My watch has stopped, bad luck to it."

"You want to rest your pony. You won't leave me alone while I'm sober!" He offered the doctor his cigarettes.

"If you put it that way. Yes, I'll have one of those. That's the finishing touch. I'm too comfortable to move myself. What was I telling you? She's not shown me the name cards, but it's a safe bet there'll be Emmet and Tone. Myself, I put in a word for Mangan. Then Cromwell and Gladstone have been asked, the way we can tell them the dirty ruffians they are. I'd bank on Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale. If you'll believe me, I heard some mention of Satan—though will you tell me what in the world would you talk to him about over the courses? You've to eschew an easy life, I can tell you, to make a hit with Miss Aoife.

If you're tortured at the end of it for your principles, it's all to your advantage with her. Or a villain will do her, if he'd be big enough and bold enough. Do you think are women all the same? She does what she likes with me. I've no hold on her." He took his re-filled glass. "You're a great man, Mr. Gilchrist. You've it over me every way, there's no denying. But you're just married, and you'll forgive a word of advice. Keep a firm hand."

"My wife," said Amiel, "has had a very safe life. She's very ignorant."

The room began to grow dark for the heavy rain clouds coming up. Drops swept against the window-panes, driven by gusts that drowned the marble clock on the mantelpiece chiming seven. The doctor's head was sunk on his chest. His expiring voice lagged, thickened as though clogged in syrup.

"We have a party on at home for my daughter's birthday. My daughter Aoife. She puts on her party dress—its all white stuff they call organdie. Very well she looks in it. We make believe to be entertaining a tableful of celebrities. Not all of them dead either. I have it on good authority—listen to this now, you'll be flattered!—Mr. Amiel Gilchrist, the explorer, is to be put next the Empress Catherine the Great, the way he can talk Russian to her. Oh, not in the flesh—that's not contemplated. But yesterday evening, driving home, 'Daddy,' she says to me, 'Mr. Gilchrist's a great man, is he?' 'He is,' says I. 'He's the first great man I've ever met,' says she, 'so he ought to come to the party. Only he must behave himself better than he did this evening.' How's that for you? Well, I'll be going. I've to be home at seven. T'wouldn't matter should the whole place be dying for want of me. She'll be waiting, to say nothing

of the Empress Catherine and Bloody Mary, and she'll never forgive it if I'm late. It's been very pleasant, Mr. Gilchrist—very pleasant, its been." His head nodded.

"Get up!" Amiel roughly shook him. "Get up, you fool! You're going home, aren't you?" The heavy body sagged against him. He left it placidly snoring, and went unsteadily through the empty hall and up the stairs. Orange was moving in the bedroom.

"I'm going to change for dinner," he said loudly, standing in the open door. "She's very firm about that." He went into his dressing-room and threw himself on the bed.

It was past nine when Molly came in. She had accepted the most pressing of the invitations to tea from hunting neighbours of her uncle and aunt, but she had declined an escort home for she wished to arrive home alone to Amiel. She had got lost and had ridden for three hours in the rain. She was met by Katie to whom she listened, mystified.

"The supper is put out in the smoking-room, Ma'am, for I didn't know to disturb him. It'd be hard, us to send him home with Terry—and Miss Aoife, it might be, on the wait for him. The way he is, he'd as soon none of us saw him. The poor gentleman, he's never been that way inside these doors—it'd break his heart to have the master know of it. Won't you eat your supper and get the wet clothes off you, first thing, Ma'am—you'll be catching your death. Arrah, wouldn't you see to yourself first? Sure he'll wait for you."

Molly turned from her and opened the dining-room door, a sombre room in all weathers, and now so dark that she could see nothing.

"Dr. O'Reilly?" she said.

"That's myself."

Reassured, she groped for the matches behind the clock and lighted one of the candles on the table. The doctor sat low in his chair with his legs stretched out straight and his hands in his pockets.

"I remember now," he said in his dying voice, like broken bellows. These did not seem the lungs in the broad fleshy chest to produce a voice of any resonance, "it was Sister Angela her name was. A very beautiful woman and the Devil, as it's well known, is attracted to everything beautiful."

Experience seemed to drop from Molly. She regretted her rashness in opening the door. "Amiel should take charge of this!" and she wondered where he could be.

"But Sister Angela would have none of the Devil. 'It's because I'm not handsome enough for her,' he says. Then he went to the tailor and the shoemaker, and he got a wig made for him and the shoulders in his coat padded. But she would have none of him. Then he was holding out his arms to her, wild for love of her, and she turns suddenly and kisses him. (Wait a bit now—don't be running off till I tell you!) 'Ah, what's this?' cries the poor Devil, 'Sure, it's always the same. Can't they stay good-looking? Look at you now!' he cries to Sister Angela. 'You that were a handsome woman that I loved! There was a young man once,' says the Devil, 'the handsomest ever I knew. But so ugly he turned that I couldn't bear the sight of him, and I had to hang him. I can't love you now,' he says to Sister Angela, 'for I can't bear them ill-favoured. I can't bear to see you, so I'm going to drown you in the river that runs through the Convent meadow.'

"'I'm afraid,' she says, 'that my soul will go to Hell.'

"'Is it the little puff that was breathed on you.' he says,

'that you're talking about? Wouldn't it be swallowed back again where it came from? a sour little mouthful of breath it'll be. But what's breathed in sour is breathed out sweet, and one puff of breath on a peck of dust is the same as another,' says the Devil, and he pushes her in the stream in the Convent meadow to hide her plainness from his sight. (You're not going, are you? Stay where you are, and I'll tell you.)

"It was Sister Cecilia was reading her prayer book in her cell, and what she was reading you'll know better than I do, because I can't remember the text word by word. But this is near enough, 'He was in all things tempted as men, but he was without sin.' Sure if he had sinned, she thought, she could have told him. 'But there's one I could tell,' she says, 'for he's the one in the universe that couldn't throw a stone at me.' So out with her into the Convent garden, and there she meets the Devil.

"'You're the one I want,' says she to him. 'What I have to confess is too bad. I'd die with shame in the confession of it. But yourself,' she says to the Devil, 'you can't put shame on me.' So then she tells him.

"'I can't absolve you,' says the Devil when he hears, 'and I can't give you comfort. But I can tell you a sin that'll make your sin feel like the petal of a blossom fallen down on you. And I can tell you loneliness that'll make your loneliness feel like your mother's arms round you. Shall I tell you that?'

"'No, don't tell me!' And off with her up the garden with her fingers to her ears—and back to her cell with her!"

"My husband," Molly strove. The wet was dripping from the edge of her habit on to the carpet.

"Ah, your husband. He was here a while ago. A man of great sympathy. We'd a very pleasant conversation. Well listen—Sister Catherine prayed late in her cell one night, 'Lord forgive us miserable sinners. Show compassion on our wickedness!' Her robe and cell were all clean white (it was a white Order) and her eyes burnt with such a brightness from a week's—"

"Dr. O'Reilly, I'm afraid you're not—"

"—a week's fasting, (You don't know this one do you? Well, you see you can be telling it in London after you've heard it) that the Devil was attracted as a child would be to snow new come down. He put out his claw and he just touches the white robe because he couldn't resist it, no more than the child would resist stepping on the snow. She turns round sharp on him, and when she sees the ugly thing he was—if she doesn't snatch hold of a scourge with two thongs to it that stood in a corner, calling, "This'll teach you to come near a holy woman, you black, dirty thing of it!' But the Devil could play at that game, and she hadn't belaboured him long before he gets the scourge from her, and she bites his ear for him. It was dirty fighting, and in the course of it there was soiled rags of her robe only left on her, and her eyes burning like hot coals—like the Devil's own eyes, you'd say. Towards the end you'd have sworn there was no holy nun in it at all, but only a herring-woman and a tinker and both of them drunk. But the Devil fought the dirtiest, and he left her lying black and blue.

"Sister Agnes we'll call the last of them. She was digging in the garden one fine morning (That's better—sit down now till you hear) when she sees the Devil skulking behind the currant bushes. She calls to him, and what does she do

but give him an apple, only he spit it out, saying the taste of it was bitter. So she gives him a pear, and she takes hold of his hand.

“‘Is it for washing me in the well you are?’ he bawls, for that roused the worst in him.

“‘What should I do washing you?’ she says, ‘when it looks to me you’ve been washed clean already.’

“‘Then why would you clip hold of me?’

“‘Because I love you,’ she says.

“‘That’s a lie,’ he says, ‘for I’m ugly as sin and I haven’t my wig on me.’

“‘I don’t notice you’re ugly,’ she said, ‘but I tell you that if the Prince of all the angels was to stand and beckon me, I’d not go to him without you.’ And they say she kissed him on the forehead.

“Sister Agnes was counted a plain sort of woman. She’d hair on her chin, they say. But the Devil thought her the most beautiful woman he ever saw, showing that they two must have loved each other uncommon well.

“And with that, mind you, never a breath of impropriety breathed against Sister Agnes! She was counted the most blessed in the Convent, and if she’s not a saint at this time, she will be. Which goes to show that you can’t love God and hate the Devil. What the divil have I been saying to you? Heavenly God, is that the time?”

“It’s only half-past nine,” said Molly. “Perhaps,” she said, doubtful, and touched by his dismay, “you’ll stay and have a late dinner. I’m sure my husband—”

“Thank you, thank you, no.”

He lumbered to his feet.

“Then I’ll ring for Terry to bring the trap round.”

He followed her into the hall.

A M I E L

"What a wretched night!" she said cheerfully, not looking at him. "I hope you won't be too late home."

"I am too late."

"Won't you take a waterproof, Dr. O'Reilly? You'll be soaked."

"Thank you, thank you, I'll not trouble."

She took her uncle's heavy mackintosh which was hanging in a recess off the hall, and helped him into it. Then she watched him go down the steps in the lamplight thrown from the hall into the wet darkness. The two tails of the mackintosh blew round his legs. His foot slipped on the wet rung of the trap. Terry had him by the arm. "Now you're all right, sir."

Molly caught her skirts and ran up the two flights of broad, shallow stairs to the bedroom.

"Orange, where's Mr. Gilchrist?"

"In the dressing-room, Miss Molly."

Her yellow teagown was laid out on the bed. She rapped on the dressing-room door.

"Amiel!"

Old Flannery came to the door.

"I think, Ma'am—"

Behind him she saw Amiel, his hair and face were running with cold water.

She stared at him in silencing shock and doubt.

"You've been hunting!" he cried thickly and he lurched, slamming the door shut.

CHAPTER IX

Molly was coming downstairs to lunch dressed in a white serge skirt and a white and blue ruffled muslin blouse. She had stayed in bed for breakfast and had risen late after her day of three unusually long cubbing runs, ending with three hours lost wandering in the rain.

She descended the stairs at an even pace, her hand lightly moving on the banister. Her face, glowing and cool, spoke of nothing. She raised her eyebrows, hearing the noise the dogs were making in the hall.

Amiel swung his arm, and the two staid creatures bounded up at him, yelping with anticipation. They dashed away and rushed back, his shouts encouraging them to wilder excitement.

When he saw his wife on the stairs above him he dropped his arm to his side. Frank and Lucy sat and panted, their tongues lolling. He waited for her to reach the ground which she did without the slightest altering of her pace.

"Good morning, Amiel. Did Orange tell you from me not to disturb me? I was having my sleep out. I wouldn't romp the dogs indoors. Lucy nearly had the gong over."

He put his free arm round her and laid his cheek against hers. "I was very foolish last night," he whispered. "Will you forgive me soon?"

She couldn't speak. The tears, that seemed worlds away from her, struggled as she clung to him, and she felt an unimagined touch of managing tenderness in her husband's arms.

"Now," he said, "we must behave properly."

"Must we? Funny Amiel!"

"Come in to lunch!" he said.

She was moved more particularly because she herself hated to ask forgiveness. At lunch she was overwrought, and talked brightly while Flannery handed the French beans and potatoes. She could not see that Amiel either showed, or seemed conscious of, any strain.

It was an afternoon of cool, heavy rain and he proposed that they should explore the contents of more of the cluttered rooms, each of them filled with a fresh aspect of Aunt Rosetta's multifarious creative and artistic activity. It was like going into one after another of old second-hand shops overflowing with junk and curiosities. The jug and basin on a washstand held a palette, brushes, and tubes of paint. The bed was covered with two large Indian shawls, billowing like mountains, under which they discovered massive gilt picture frames and their canvasses piled beside them.

"She painted those!" cried Molly, recognizing her aunt's initials.

The wardrobe held an Arabian kaftan, a guitar, a clay modelling set and a set of Chinese ivory chessmen.

"This is a lovely Burmese wooden bowl," said Molly.

"I shall buy it for you. What else would you like?"

"The Hepplewhite chest, if all those African musical instruments were cleared off it. And the drawers emptied. These engravings of old Dublin are lovely. But aren't you going to buy something?"

For tea, Molly wore the cyclamen satin tea gown which was his favourite. They had tea in the drawing-room, and Molly liked this room best because of its ballroom-like

sense of space and sparseness. "We're not stifled with things here."

Amiel, too, gazed down the long polished floor which reflected the firelight,

"Have you ever been to a fancy-dress ball?" he asked. She laughed. "They're rather amusing."

"Yes."

"I wish you wouldn't feed the dogs, darling. They're too fat. I hate seeing sporting dogs spoilt."

When Katie had taken the tray away, he lounged on the velvet *pouf*, resisting his arm on the sofa where she lay. She gently flicked a crumb from his lapel. He caught her hand where it moved and held it.

"Do you wish you'd married Tony Kitteredge?" he asked.

"Tony!"

"I expect he could have made you very happy."

"Do you, darling? Thanks for the flattery. So that's what I wanted, is it? A nice, ordinary, amusing young man—"

"I'm not very ordinary, am I?"

Her lips touched the top of his head. "Well, not very, perhaps."

"But you see I know it. Almost the minute afterwards I always know it, and then I laugh at myself. I'm much, much more ordinary than you think."

"My dearest, do you mean ordinary or normal?"

"Yes, normal. But I don't want you to feel ashamed of me."

"Darling, what are you saying?"

"Yes," he murmured when he lifted his head from her breast, "we'll have fun, Molly. We'll enjoy ourselves. I've

money—we both have. We needn't do anything except what we want to."

"And that is?"

"What's the matter?" he asked anxiously. "Won't you help me?"

"You know the only thing I want in the world is to help you."

"I'll tell you this—I hadn't much of a time in prison. And then I died you know, Molly."

"You were unhinged."

"Yes. I thought I died. Molly, don't you want to be happy while you're alive?"

"I am happy," said Molly. "I'm happier than I think I've ever been since we met. Because you've asked me to help you, and I know I can. Oh, my funny darling! Don't dare to talk to me about Tony again, and the comfortable deadly lifelessness his wife will have. Why I was in terror of it. It was my nightmare that I might wake up one day and find I'd been caught by it. I married you, knowing you were wonderful and that life with you could never be lifeless."

"Knowing that I?—You mean the exploring, don't you? But that was a lie."

"I know. I understand now. What there is, is something far more wonderful to me than any exploring could be. I mean your composing. That's your value in life, and my business is to help you get back to it again. My glorious business, darling! It rocks me with happiness when I think of it. I know you've suffered. What has your sort ever had to do with comfort? It's for neither of us. It's for Tony and his wife-to-be, and all the sheep, poor darlings!"

She could see he was entirely surprised. He remained

quiet, staring at the fire while he still held her hand, moving it across his chest with his uninjured hand. He said at last, "You see you don't understand, Molly."

"Understand what, my ordinary one?" she asked indulgently.

"I don't know if I shall be able to tell you."

"There's nothing you can't tell me," she said calmly.

"I mean that in this room—" he looked round it despairingly. "At Nertchinsk—it was pretty hard there. The guards carry knouts and the prisoners are chained at night."

"It's terrible. I've read about it."

"Have you?"

The Sèvres cherub in its cabinet met his lost and wandering gaze.

"They had to take precautions because they were afraid the prisoners would rise. We were not peasants there you know. They send the politicals to Nertchinsk."

"That was why they were afraid you would rise. Because you had something to live for."

"Most of us had a four-year sentence in the mines. If we survived it we'd be allowed to live in the town as ordinary colonists, so long as we never tried to escape, until the rest of our sentence was up. At the end of two years we did rise. They got us under almost at once. We hadn't any chance, really. Some of us got years added to our sentences in the mines, and I and twelve others were sent to settlements in the Yeneisisk."

"You? Why were you one of those, Amiel?"

"Well, I was awfully strong," he said staring at the cherub.

"What had that to do with it?"

"So I was one of the nine."

"The nine?"

"Who got the keys from the guards when they were locking our chains at night. We had to knock them out, and then we unlocked all the chains."

"And you did that, Amiel! And I was at Stream Hall turning Fraulein's hair grey!"

He was gazing at the red turf and he laughed. "I had two years left of my hard-labour sentence, Molly. Only two years. And I did that. My mother was very ill at the time. Katya wrote to me that she died after she heard I was sent to Verkhoyt."

"I can understand that. But I can understand, too, Amiel, how you had to be one of the nine. It wasn't only because you were strong."

"I'm trying to explain—I want to explain something." He sat for a long time silent while he got his memories organised, and she thought of the prisoners in their shed waiting for the guards to come that night.

His lips moved.

"What are you saying to yourself, darling? Do you know that you talk to yourself? Do you think in Russian, Amiel?"

"It was an old Russian song." He disregarded her bewildered question and went on, "The Cossacks had it in their guardroom and I took it as the theme of the first movement. I hadn't ever before attempted a symphony."

"Oh, Amiel, your first symphony! Give me that theme—touch it out on the piano for me!"

His voice sunk into inaudible following of his thoughts. It rose abruptly:

"Here's a funny thing. I remember one night at Nert-

chinsk lying and thinking of some counterpoint in a little string quartette I was working at in Petersburg before I was arrested. It gave me a lot of trouble, until suddenly that night I knew what it should be. That was about a week before we revolted."

The fire had gone low and he rose and put on some sods from the copper hod. The room was not cold, but she had noticed this action before as being a mechanical one with him. She had never known him to let a fire go down.

"Verkhoyt," he said returning to the *pouf* beside her, "is about as far north as you can live for long. They change the guard every three years or they go mad."

"Are the prisoners mad?"

"If they're dangerous they're in the madhouse. My sentence was for seven years at Verkhoyt to take the place of my twenty at Nertchinsk. Because you see everyone dies at Verkhoyt. I never saw anyone leave there. They kept dying. It's so queer to remember, but I was dreadfully afraid to die. I don't think I was afraid before. At Nertchinsk I wasn't—I never thought of it."

"But Amiel." He paused. "No, go on. I was going to say something stupid. I was going to ask, 'What was there to live for at Verkhoyt?'"

"We took them over to the deadhouse and left them till spring. When the floods are gone and the ground is soft enough, the first thing is to take them out of the deadhouse and bury them."

He looked up inquiringly.

"You can tell me anything," she said in a whisper.

"I thought I was hurting you, leaning my arm on you."

"Go on, Amiel."

"I was going to say that it's nothing to be afraid of. If

I knew I was going to die to-morrow I wouldn't care a fig."

She lay still.

"May I smoke?" he asked. "Will you mind?"

"Of course not. Go on," she said. "Tell me how you lived. Tell me everything. I won't stop you again."

To inhale, he leaned his head back on the sofa close to her thigh so that she looked down into his upturned face.

"Its quite possible," he said lazily, "that you think it a worse life than it was. In parts it wasn't really so very bad. You only have to keep warm. In our hut there were fourteen, and there are two stoves, and the door is sealed *tight*. There's as much to eat as we can."

"Is it good food?"

"No one asks that. You don't know, Molly, what it is to enjoy eating."

"Who were the others?"

"In our hut, do you mean? I'm not sure who they were."

"Amiel, you don't know! You lived in the same house all together—"

"The same room. Kostya used to say he was a colonel in the Guards. He was, I expect. All of them had been there for a long time, several years, when I came. Do you know, Molly, what they called me? Yossudar."

"What does that mean?"

"Prince."

"Oh."

"You'd call me something else, wouldn't you?" and he smiled. "So would the Kitteredges. At Verkhoyt they weren't so critical."

"And the guards," she said after hesitating, "were they horrible, too?"

"Horrible? Oh, you mean I suppose, did they flog us? No, they were all right, on the whole—very friendly. They used to play cards with us. They'd bring vodka sometimes to play for, and I can't tell you how divinely heavenly that was."

"They weren't afraid of the prisoners rising?"

"Oh, lord, no!"

"Did it help at all, Amiel—I should think it would be something to hold on to—to remember it was for seven years, no more?"

"Would you say the same if it was seventy?"

"*Seventy?*"

"Or seventeen? Or fifty-seven?"

"But it was seven."

"I suppose it was. It might have been any length. You can't see to the end of it. After the second winter you don't try."

The smoke mounted and hung in the air above his head.

"Amiel, I can't bear it! Tell me this—tell me quickly, darling—" He twisted his head round to look up at her. Her fingers moved out and touched his hair. "Did you get another theme for your Symphony?"

The smoke caught in his throat.

"Oh!" he choked fretfully when he could speak. "Don't you understand yet?"

Her hand with her wedding-ring and a unique little pearl and amethyst ring her guardian had found for her seventeenth birthday, stayed on his thick hair. Beyond the tall, dimmed narrow panes between their pale brocade curtains the rain muttered caressingly down.

"Katie will come with the lamps soon."

"Do you want them?" he said irritably. "Just when

the dark is comfortable, we have to have the lights brought!"

"Amiel—I've wondered all night—what made you let Dr. O'Reilly spoil that child's birthday evening? It was entirely your fault, its happening. . . . Why don't you answer? I hate that habit you have of sulking when you're spoken to. It's like a bad-tempered child. It's like a baby."

"I'm not sulking," he said mildly. "You always think I am when I don't answer. I forget you always expect an answer."

"I don't understand you. I think sometimes that Verkhoyt has left you without any feeling, or sympathy, for anybody else. I don't want to think so. It frightens me. But if you can't feel pity, at least you can't deny that it exists. When you come out of a dark room, the light makes you shut your eyes. But the light's there just the same, you've only to open your eyes to see it. Don't keep yours shut, my darling! Look here—in those awful years, can there have been *only* darkness? Did you see *nothing* brave done? Not the least trace of goodness towards anyone? I can't believe it. People are still people, wherever they may be."

Katie came in, carrying the lamps. She placed one on the mantelpiece above the silent couple and the second on the piano, and she drew the curtains across the wet blue panes. The room came to life in the lamplight. From being the ghost of a room, an old woman somnolent in the autumn dusk among memories of grandeur and gaiety, it became filled with a richness and a sly shining of gilt and polished antique wood. The cream brocade twinkled with gold thread. Beyond the pool of the lamplight, where there had

been dreary greyness, there was strong black shadow far back in which the gold on a Rockingham plate winked.

"Katie saw you on the floor, Amiel!"

"Yes," he said, some excitement rising and quivering in his voice, "I've seen all those. People are people. It doesn't make much difference. And I don't attach such importance to pity as you do. I wouldn't take much credit for it. The most wretched funk can feel it."

"Well, what if he can? Besides he can't. Cowards can only pity themselves."

"Or it's like you and the donkey."

"The *donkey*?"

"You didn't remember it again, did you? There was a fellow at Verkhoyt—Pashka. You said there was a governess who made your life a torment when you were a child. Well, that man made mine a torment. He was a great big peasant fellow as strong as four. If you could have seen him—but you'd be shocked if you could. You wouldn't believe it if I told you about him."

"I'd know it was suffering that made him like that—just as I know now it was misery that warped poor old Gribby."

"Oh, yes, it was suffering all right. The damned suffer, too, don't they? But you wouldn't be sorry for them, would you?"

The truth of his misery was bare in his face which she had thought was the simple mirror of his emotions. But now she feared that, whereas other people are able to batten themselves down, his hatches had been forced and left open. He couldn't close them, or even decently half-close them, for the hinges were smashed. Everything was open. You had only to look in at it. The locks, and the labels

marked "Private," had all been torn away and trampled on.

To the cry for help, her response was less maternal than that of a champion. She would take the sick and wearied soldier in her arms and bandage his wounds; but speedily she would stimulate him with words of courage, pointing him to high examples and send him back to fight. "It is better to die fighting," she would say to him, "than to live a renegade or a deserter."

She bent over Amiel below her, half lying as he was against the sofa, and they might have stayed a long time in such a kiss, in such a silence. But she whispered.

"There's no question of being damned, my poor love. You have that symphony to write."

He writhed his head round in amazement.

"There's nothing stronger than it, darling—nothing, not love even. I know that's true and I gladly accept it. It *can't* be killed. Deep down in you, under all that's happened, it's there still, biding its time to take hold of you more strongly than ever, perhaps—Amiel! do please learn to exercise some restraint! And stop kicking the rug—*how* can you be so childish? I make allowances, but I can't stand this behaving like a hysterical idiot, whatever the circumstances."

He pushed his arms across his forehead upon which, such was his physical condition and his nervous agitation, a light sweat had sprung. He subdued his voice.

"I'm very sorry, Molly, but I've tried to explain and now I don't know how to go on trying. In London I went to Covent Garden with the Kitteredges. I think it was *Otello*. When we got home I was sick. I couldn't sleep, and for nights afterwards I couldn't. I shall never write music,

whatever else I may do. If you knew how the thought of it sickens me! When have I ever had a little peace? I want to—”

“You want to deny yourself. But you haven’t the right to do that, Amiel.”

“The right? Who do I owe one *thing* to? There they were—just the same as in Petersburg, the smooth silly faces and the tiaras and furs—just the same. The chance that I might ever give them a crumb of enjoyment would be enough to keep me from ever wanting to write another note, even if I could. But I couldn’t. It’s dropped off, Molly.”

“Then it never was the real thing.”

“I can hardly believe it was ever real. I never wanted to come back, you know, Molly.”

“You don’t mean from Verkhoyt?”

“Yes. I’m not fit to. I made myself fit Verkhoyt, or I’d have been dead long ago—and buried. At the end I wasn’t fit even for Verkhoyt—can you believe that? Not good enough. I did die then. I had to. The others used at least to go quietly—mostly, that is. You thought they were still asleep, and then sometimes someone would find they were dead. But mine—well, there’s no bearing such pain alive! Only after all, you see, I wasn’t dead. Is the pain ever going to get less, instead of more? How will I go on bearing it? I can’t bear it, I know that much.”

He knelt up, catching a fold of cyclamen satin in a blind movement, and put his head down on her knees as she lay.

“I’m so miserable, Molly,” he uttered childishly, with a sound like a sob.

“I know.”

He looked up at her in wonder. Her blue eyes, so honest,

candid, and deep, and the accepting sadness of her tone, made something curious come over him. He lifted her arm so smooth and white. There were no little hairs bleached white against sun-browned skin. The touch of it made him realise where he was again.

"No," he said unsteadily, "you don't know."

"Something else," she sighed, "that I don't know?"

"But I want you to know. You're the only person in the world I could tell. If you knew, it would be different from all the others knowing. There's *nobody* like you, Molly." He began, the hand grasping the fold of her dress starting to tremble violently. "I rushed up into the snow that night—I think I told you that. I felt it coming down on me when I fell. I thought it was covering me. Some of the others must have come out of the hut and dragged me back quite quickly, before both hands and my feet froze. I didn't know it when my fingers were amputated. I was dreadfully ill for months afterwards. I've been told that I was eating and walking, only they thought my mind was gone. My step-family sent the money for my passage back to Russia because my sentence was up. My step-brother Arkasha met the boat at Tobolsk—it must have been a nuisance for him! But I still didn't know anything. When I began to come round at Katya's and Mihail's in Petersburg, she told me I'd had brain fever. Do you think it could have been a fever? It was so peaceful, the only peaceful time I've had for years. I thought I was dead, not in the dead-house, but under the snow, just wasting quietly away into nothing. Nothing to feel or remember.

"I came back very slowly. I never tried to. Things kept coming back, not all at once, but separately. The whole time I was in Italy, eight months in the sanatorium, I was

still numb in my mind. I was convinced the snow had got in there. I remembered, but I didn't feel. It wasn't until I stayed with the Kitteredges—no, after that. It was when we came to London from France—" He stopped, and she felt the stronger trembling of the hand bunching her dress. How unstable he was, and how adrift! He was cut hopelessly from his moorings, and at last she felt despair for him and the topaz eyes in his wounded, desolate face, his massive forehead and his quivering boy's mouth.

"Do you remember the lectures?" he asked.

"Why the lectures?"

"The first one. I was talking about a sledge in a blizzard—it was in a book—*The Young Arctic Adventurers*. The snow falling and burying—"

"I remember. You dropped the tumbler."

"It was the look. On all your faces."

"The look? What look? What are you trying to say?"

"I'm trying to tell you. At Verkhoyt we slept on plank beds all round the walls. Mine was in the back wall, facing the steps up to the door. They sat up in their beds instead of going to sleep. They said not one word, none of them. They watched and watched me. When I shut my eyes that look's there now. Its *burned* there. And that evening at the lecture it was on your faces, and I was falling dead under it again. Then I saw your face, it was near the platform, and it changed. It was so lovely, and for so long they'd all been hideous! And you were sorry for me. It was wonderful. I kept looking at you, and then I was able to go on. Besides I knew at once, almost, that the look was my imagination. But after that—but oh, no! I can't tell you what it was to meet people and feel them look at me! Have you ever had a dream that you're naked, and people

are staring at you, and it's all you can do not to fall on the ground, because you can't hide?

"At the other lecture, the second one—you think, now you understand about the exploring, that my nerve gave way because they were finding me out, don't you? I knew, of course, I could never take in those professors, and I didn't care. It made me laugh. I was enjoying that lecture. The drawing I knew would do it. I'd copied it from *The Siberian Kurgans* at the British Museum. It was a book my grandfather had. I used to know it quite well because I used to carve little figures from descriptions in it, for his archæological lectures to students. There was an old fellow with a beard next to you, and when he took the drawing it was all I could do not to roar with laughter. He looked up at me, pushing up his glasses like my grandfather used to, and it was the look!

"I don't remember getting out of that room. I suppose I took a taxi to the Kitteredges. And then you came, Molly. Do you know, I only went to places, all that time in London, because I hoped to see you? I used to watch your dancing. You knew nothing, but the day we walked at Ranelagh, do you remember? That was just as if you put your hand out to me in the dark. When you came to my room after the lecture—I didn't know why you came, or why you spoke to me like you did. I thought of nothing but you all that night—and if you could know what the night had been! But you do know a little."

"*Why* didn't you tell me about Verkhoyt then, Amiel?"

"About Verkhoyt? Why should I? I didn't want to talk about it."

"I see."

"But now it's different. That look, Molly—"

"What sort of a look, Amiel? What does it mean?"

"It means that they know, that's all. They look at me and they know. If it was loathing or contempt, or anything besides I could bear it. But you'll know, Molly, and you'll look at me, and it won't be the look, will it? You're so kind—there's nobody—" His eyes were caught by an old paste cross she wore on a silver ribbon. "That's pretty," he said, releasing the fold of satin to touch it. He yawned and sunk into silence. He looked exhausted.

"You've tired yourself," she said in a precise, remote little voice. "I don't think perhaps you should talk any more."

He lifted his eyes. "What did you say?"

"Are you sure," she said carefully, "that you haven't said enough? It would be a pity—"

"Pity!" He jerked himself upright from his huddled position, and she saw the pulse in his temple beating.

"Don't *shout*, Amiel!"

"How can you expect I should feel pity for *anyone*—when there's nobody, not the vilest—not Pashka—who's done what I did? Have you been thinking I'm mad? What rot! I know as well as you do that the look is never there really. Its only my imagination. All the same, if they did know, there's not anyone anywhere who'd agree I had a right to be alive. O'Reilly would take care I didn't touch him if he knew."

His flares of emotional excitement never lasted long. His energy failed. He was cramped, and he got up and moved to the fender seat. It was piled with cushions, and he lay at full length on his side, supported by his elbow. He got out another cigarette, using his mutilated hand to

strike the match. She had never seen him voluntarily bring that hand into the light.

"This," she was thinking, "*this* is Amiel!"

He did not finish lighting the cigarette, he seemed to forget about it. His spoiled hand dropped back to where it lay unheeded on the cushion beside him. His lips moved and gradually, as if the transition from inaudibility was unconscious, his inward reflections became audible.

"But what I've tried to understand," he said, "is that I couldn't have done what Simtsoff did. I couldn't hate enough. But Pashka, in Simtsoff's place, would have done it. Kostya would. I suppose a lot of men would, and they'd live on afterwards. Before you came to my room that afternoon in London, Molly, I was thinking, 'It's the end.' After what *I* did, nobody goes on living. And I died, but they dragged me back."

She was not easily frightened before midnight, but his crassness was frightening her. This nightmare-like figure he was confidentially building in front of her—what business had he to expose it to her? Were his eyes blind to see his danger? Evidently.

"Simtsoff—" he went slowly on, "Simtsoff, you'll understand. He hated her enough to kill her. But I was Maja's friend."

Some instinct made him raise his head at that point. They looked at each other, and Amiel's eyes were opened to the rocking ground where he was stepping. At least he stopped still, at a loss what to do now.

Her poised, icy smile further baffled him.

"Don't you think," she said crisply, "we've had confessions enough for one evening, Amiel? Naturally, in a situa-

tion like yours there were things you're ashamed of. Give me credit for a little knowledge of life, and some imagination! You don't have to answer to me for them. And you don't have to rub my nose in them to salve your conscience."

So wildly she struck out in self-defence—or was it to save them both? She sensed the unmanned creature flinch.

"Oh, heavens! Have you *never* stood up to anything, Amiel? Must you keep running for shelter? Did you stand up to Verkhoyt? No, you took shelter, even there. You say you made yourself 'fit' there. Oh, if you were hard and revengeful, I could respect you! It would be a sign of life. But your hardness is only callousness. You have no pity. And where you might feel bitter resentment you feel only a vague sort of distaste for the 'smooth silly faces' and the tiaras and furs. But you don't denounce anything. You don't bear witness. No—you talk about 'having fun'—'enjoying ourselves.' You'd crawl into another shelter and wrap yourself round *again* in all the comfort and warmth there's to be had. And you ask *me* to help you this time!"

He watched her curiously. "I think you said, Molly, you'd pity Pashka. He didn't take shelter. But he cracked in the end. He—" No, she was right. He had talked enough perhaps.

"I thought," she swept passionately on, "when you said they called you—"

"Yossudar."

"—that it was because you stood up when they were all down and remained a prince by never abandoning the dignity of your own integrity. What *right* had you to abandon it? *They* had the right of wretched, inferior souls, poor, poor things! They can take no blame. But that *you* should

give way—And now to deny the very ideals you suffered for! I tried to think you were joking that night with Dr. O'Reilly at dinner. But you weren't joking. 'I loathe poor people.' You do loathe them. That's quite simply what you feel.

"Don't tell me you've suffered too much! Through keeping true to yourself, you might have. But you took good care not to suffer too much."

The agony of Pashka wouldn't let his huge body rest. They were all asleep when Pashka slid from his bed, with a long howl like a wolf's, and they woke to see him crouched, hitting his head against the floor.

"And the great, precious thing you were given, your music, Amiel—what are you without it? Nothing from outside could have killed it that didn't kill your body, too. So you yourself deliberately killed it, so that you might easily live the life that was round you. You didn't have the strength to keep your eyes on your vision. *'It wasn't a bad life.'* Could you have said that if you'd not compromised? If you'd been a rebel instead of a slave? You adopted Verkhoyt. That's why it didn't kill you.

"When you surrendered, of course you did things that now, in normal conditions, revolt you to look back at. But I'm afraid you'll have to stand up under that alone. I won't look back at them with you. I'm married to you."

The illusory network of their relationship lay round them in shreds, and they were still together. To-morrow morning they would be having breakfast together. "But to-night," Molly thought, "I shall be alone. I'll go to bed alone."

Amiel lay on the fender-seat slowly tickling Frank's ears with the hand that held his cigarette. The other hand was

in his pocket. If he would only swear, saying he'd had enough and was getting out of the house for a walk before dinner! But it did not occur to Amiel to move from a room because there had been an emotional scene. Presently she said, "It's nearly time for you to go and dress. You take such a time, you'll be late if you don't go soon, and it's not fair to keep dinner waiting. Oh, Amiel, don't drop ash all over the cushions! Find an ashtray."

He stood up obediently but there were no ashtrays in the drawing-room, which was not intended for smoking. So he reached along the mantelpiece for an antique silver paten dish and, with his frequent clumsiness that so astonished and perplexed him, his arm swept a Bristol blue glass jug, and it splintered in fragments on the marble grate.

CHAPTER X

"*What have you done?*" said the Voice, when Molly lay alone in their bed.

One day eight-year-old Molly had seen Gribby, coming out of her bedroom, lock the door ostentatiously behind her and drop the key in her pocket.

"Why do you leave your door locked?" Molly could not resist inquiring.

"So there'll be no getting in there when my back's turned, and poking and prying. I know you, miss," Gribby had replied.

This procedure would not have occurred to Molly who had no slyness. But she scorned vain repudiations. An aloof voice which she had never heard before whispered, "*Never go into people's rooms when they're away and look at things.*"

Gribby continued to address herself to Molly, a dirty-minded little girl of phenomenal deceit, greed and meanness; and Molly, fiercely dissociating herself from this figure of Gribby's demented creation, passionately rejected for herself, as no Sunday school could have taught her to reject, the sordid, the deceitful, the greedy, and the mean.

"You'd lie to me, miss. I know you," said Gribby.

"*Never tell lies,*" the Voice commanded.

Gribby and her obsession departed, but the Voice remained. It was Molly's religion, her sole God. She appeared a creature of buoyant spirits capable of a pungent witticism which had occasionally earned her an enemy. She could

keep a drawing-room laughing with her imitations of Gaby Deslys. Her Kate Hardcastle in an amateur production of *She Stoops to Conquer* was a triumph of graceful comedy. But the Voice prevented her from ever taking herself humorously. It was her goad and her taskmaster. Exacting and implacable, its praise was silence. To the Voice alone she admitted a right to censure her. To the Voice alone she admitted herself in the wrong and, having received its unsparing lash, she felt no obligation to confess herself in the wrong to anyone else. If people expected humble apology from her, and chose to be resentful when they did not get it, "Let them be so foolish!" she thought. She had no patience with them. The Voice did not enjoin humility. The ideal of life it expressed and enjoined was far less the Christian than the Arthurian, and far less Galahad than Launcelot. It had less use for the pilgrim's robe than for the knight's shining armour. It was in fact no more, and no less, than the Arthurian Life Beautiful, desiring virtue as beauty and abhorring evil as ugliness. In her heart Molly believed that the world should be beautiful, and therefore happy. Its ugliness pierced her, shadowed her, tortured her with dreams. By daylight she had helped more than one unfortunate with money and with practical planning. Her springing assurance of success infected them, even when her painting of the future shone too dazzling for their sick hearts to trust in. To be swindled by such an unfortunate stung her as scarcely anything else did. She could find no tolerance for the deception and she never forgave it.

But Molly Willoughby had begun to feel the isolation of the companionless soul. It widened, but also it had closed, round her. On its fringes hung the desolate who must be succoured, the pitiable who must be pitied, the failures who

must be made to feel successful, the cheerful mediocrities who must be frolicked with, the old connexions who must be loved, and, among them all, never a prince to take the princess's hand and speak with her as her equal.

"What have you done?" the Voice said. *"What have you done?"*

But she had done it. "I see my life from now," she said.

"You must accept it."

"Yes." It stretched away, a desert of silence. Silence, which had menaced her, would imprison her. Day by day she would grow more silent. She would never nag. The ideals she deeply cherished were aristocrats which withdrew proudly from the stones of argument and denial. She would be silent.

But she couldn't help a shocked gasp, in the solitude of the night, for her youth joined to a being in ashes. "I would have given him so much! All the strength, all the best in me. It would all have been his. I only wanted to worship him."

"He only needs your compassion."

In the future he might be happy. He might achieve the "ordinariness" for which he hungered. It would be achieved with torturing struggling, with determination, miserable ordeals and sweated triumphs. He would wrap it round him and it would shelter him. Oh, if they could have met in his early youth! Then the horrific cruelty of life to life burdened her. She felt that she was choking.

"Let me sleep!" she implored someone obscure for mercy.

It was dark, so dark. She would never find him. There was nobody here because it was too dark, and nobody outlived their sentence here. She touched something hang-

ing down—it was an arm, so cold and hard it was like marble. It hung down over a shelf in the wall along which the naked body lay. She passed her hand up the body until she came to the face, and there she felt the clammy globules of the eyes, and so she knew it was not marble, but dead and frozen.

“I shall find him,” she said, “because of the scar over his heart where I think he was burned. I know the touch of it in the dark.”

She went from one to another of the cold marble bodies on their shelves but he was not there, and there was no one alive.

“Look out of the window,” a voice whispered, it was the voice of the chairman, Lady Kitteredge’s brother-in-law, who was the consul (retired) at somewhere South American. “It’s moonlight on the snow out there—you can see what’s happening.”

“No!” she shrieked.

“To penetrate Nature at its most awful because most hidden,” went on the whisper. “To step from the light into the dark.”

She shrieked again, “No!” The moonlight was coming in from somewhere, and now she saw the stiff white forms lying. “But he’s dead, too,” she said. “They’re flogging the dead. They’re flogging the dead.” She was laughing so much that she did not for a time see it was the door opening slowly which was letting the moonlight in. Terror made her wild and froze her.

“Amiel!” she screamed. “Keep them out, don’t let them come in!”

“They’re all right on the whole,” the chairman’s whisper came. “Very friendly.”

"Oh, Amiel!"

He was sitting on the side of the bed. His shoulders, turned so that he faced her, blocked square between her and the room's obscurity. The little firelight made his hair shine with a reddish glint and outlined the statue's head. The mass of him looked very solid and dependable. He was in his pyjamas.

"I thought you'd gone to bed hours ago," she said in a small voice.

"I came to see how your headache was."

She tautened under the bedclothes, but no cool answer presented itself.

"Not very well," she uttered pitifully.

"I don't wonder. I talk too much. I always did."

"That's funny!" she said laughing slightly. "When I saw you first I really thought you were hardly able to talk at all."

"Oh, public speaking is one thing. I was never any good at it. My friends always told me I ought to talk less—"

"And what?" she asked as he rather clumsily checked.

"You're shivering," he whispered, leaning over her. She clung to him.

He heard the wind screaming, whipping up the fallen snow. The last blue petal on the veronica shrub was being seized away. He felt the satin nightgown covering her warm sweetness.

She, snuggled close in his arms with a strange illusion of safety and comfort, could almost have wished that she might only and wholly pity him, and not wound and bitterly sting and lash them both with love. . . .

During the week the elderly friends of her uncle and aunt, with whom she had stayed to tea after cubbing,

called. They wished to offer to mount her if she thought of hunting again.

"Bother them!" said Molly. "They're the worthiest old country bores. I'll make your excuses, Amiel."

But he surprised her by saying he would meet the visitors. She thought this was some idea of pleasing her, and her heart smote her.

"They're really not worth bothering about, darling. You'll be frightfully bored. I'm bored stiff with them thrusting in on us like this. You might think they'd realise we don't want spectators."

"I love to watch you among people, you know," he said.

She watched him, too as, stretched in one of his relaxed attitudes in a brocade covered armchair, he listened while Lady Moyley chattered to him. He seemed really to listen.

His breadth, his fairness, his slight languor of ill health, his mannerly attention, his slow smile, and the considered answers in his soft voice of such beautiful intonation, all, Molly saw, were charming the elderly lady. While she listened to Sir Arthur's rather wistful gallantries, Molly's heart rushed towards her husband, for now he looked more than ever what, on her first sight of him, she had thought him.

She could not re-make him a prince, nor could she ever make him count in the world.

"No," she said to Sir Arthur, "its too kind of you, but I don't mean to hunt for the short time we'll be staying here. We're not sure where we'll spend the autumn, but we intend to be in London for Christmas."

"Gay London, Mrs. Gilchrist, gay London! You'll hear people in plenty say they wouldn't be bothered going over to London when they can get up to Dublin in the winter,

but I say there's no comparison. You'd find Dublin very tame after London."

"Is this the first you've seen of Ireland, Mr. Gilchrist?" asked Lady Moyley.

"Yes, the first."

"We spend our time over here crying it down, but there are worse places to live in, so I think. Now in England does it strike you there's a lot of fuss made over the conventions that don't matter, and not enough over the few that do? But, of course, you'll be all for a good time, dancing and all the rest of it. I suppose you found the Season full of enjoyment, did you?"

"Did I, Molly?" he asked, with a flicker of his heavy eyelids towards her.

"Ah, you blasé young men! Nothing's good enough for you. I'll tell you what I go to London for, now I'm past the age for the Season—the Opera. *The Ring, Lohengrin!* I've heard them a dozen times apiece, Mr. Gilchrist. I hope to go to Bayreuth next year and hear one of them there. Oh, superb they are! But that's not what would interest you, is it? Did you see *The Merry Widow?*"

"Are you coming, Lavinia? (I've to drag my wife away everywhere, or she'd stay talking till night.) It's been nice of you to put up with our intrusion, Mrs. Gilchrist. Do you hear at all from your aunt and uncle?"

"Well, goodbye, Mr. Gilchrist. Wait a minute now—isn't there something I saw in a London paper about you? Wasn't there something, Arthur? I remember the name because—or was it Dr. O'Reilly mentioned something when he came last Wednesday to look at my ankle where I turned it standing up on a flower pot to look at the sugar pears—"

"Are you coming, Lavinia?"

"Goodbye, Mrs. Gilchrist."

"Goodbye!"

"Goodbye."

"That's a handsome young fellow, Arthur. A quiet, well-mannered young fellow—takes the trouble to behave himself and not yawn in your face when you're talking to him. Drive home through the town will you? I want to say a word at Cassidy's about the meal he's sending us for the hens. They're a handsome couple, the pair of them, both so fair. But what in the world do you think took them to Cullenstown for a honeymoon?"

"They're not bored with each other yet, at all events."

"They're not indeed. If I ever saw a young fellow in love, it's that one. He couldn't keep it out of his eyes every while he looked at her."

"I didn't get a good look at his eyes then, for he never looked at me straight the whole time. It's what I don't take to in a fellow."

"What's the matter with his hand, wouldn't you wonder? That was a very pleasant voice he had. Wasn't it pleasant, Arthur?"

"It was," said Sir Arthur.

Amiel put his arm round his wife's supple waist as they turned back from seeing the gig containing their guests drive away.

"How they admired you!" he said. "Did you enjoy them?"

"Not a bit. I hope to heaven all aunt and uncle's dear friends in the neighbourhood aren't going to make a nuisance of themselves. We haven't come here to be sociable.

I shall give Flannery orders to tell anyone else who calls that we're not at home."

Molly spoke, attacked by one of her sharpest bouts of social biliousness. If, in the middle of setting a new house in order, strangers had walked in on the turmoil, they might have caused her such outraged and petulant resentment.

"I didn't think they were so bad," he said.

Walking slowly back from the hall-door with his arm round her waist, a terror and pain went through him at the thought of losing her. The memory of the minutes in the Registrar's Office gave him no confidence. Everyone in his life had been taken away from him.

He had long thoughts about her. She understood nothing. So often she was angry. Her anger was like a little dog barking. Often it was as though, barking at nothing, she ran in circles, biting herself. Her anger, though it wearied him, could not find the way to touch him. It was just the barking of a little dog. When he saw her hurt and exhausted from running and biting herself, he was moved to take her in his arms—although nothing, for the first moment at least, could make her angrier.

She moved before him like a dancer in a continuous *pas seul* of actions and poses of beauty, the poses never held long enough to satisfy his starved, dwelling, gaze. From kneeling to place apples in neat rows on the floor of the loft for winter, she would spring up, while he was still held by the fall of her skirt over her upright knee—and then her light swiftness of movement took his breath away. She never hurried, though she would run up and down stairs, but she walked so that a thin summer dress rippled

back against her body. She stood before the fire with her hands behind her clasping her elbows, and her weight on one hip. In a linen morning frock, she would uncurl herself and jump up from a chair like a little girl. She smoked a cigarette as others played diavolo, idly and amusedly for a few minutes, but not taking it seriously. She stood smoking and tilting her head on its long throat a little sideways and backwards, and she narrowed her eyes as she blew the smoke. Her eyes were two questions waiting for an answer. One sunny September morning, that was the last flare of summer, she stepped in through the French window of the drawing-room with a mass of yellow chrysanthemums held like a baby in her arms. She wore a bright blue linen dress. She stood in the path of a sunbeam bending her head to the flowers, while the fingers of her free hand moved, plucking the lower leaves from their stems.

Who carps at the summer because there are stormy days? She was the brightness of the sunlight, the beauty of flowers, the sudden striking of the July storm, the vitality of summer lightning.

The immediate future was black dark, and the immediate past had its horrific darkness. A tiny lighted circle, the flame of a night-light burning in the dark—was the present.

Two or three other callers, inspired by the example of Sir Arthur and Lady Moyley to gratify their curiosity, came—and were turned away at the door by the courteous Flannery. Dunbeg with its honeymoon couple lapsed into the isolation that had wrapped them, except for Dr. O'Reilly's visits, since July; and now Dr. O'Reilly no longer came.

The undusted, cluttered rooms were beginning to smell

damp. The ghost of her parents' romance had long faded out of them for Molly. She forgot to think of it. In a fanciful mood she imagined that she and Amiel must leave ghosts here.

Streams of moisture wandered down the walls on wetter days. The air was warm and the rain fell cool, not cold.

"It means, though," Molly said, "that summer really is over and winter's coming. I love a crisp sunny autumn—those wonderful, clear days, the best of all in the year I think. But this wet and heaviness is such a sad way for it to come."

"At Verkhoyt," said Amiel, letting the word out casually, "at the end of winter it rains. Spring is all water—for days and days nothing but rain while the thaw goes on."

He stood at the window watching the rain come down, listening to the eager and gentle rush of it. Nobody died in the spring.

He turned from the window and lifted Molly and her piece-bag in his arms. She was sewing bags for fresh lavender to replace the faded and musty bags hanging for years in wardrobes and bathroom.

"Amiel, don't! Darling, you're not strong enough."

Indeed his head swam and he thought he was going to faint. Time had passed since he had run with Mother under one arm and Katya under the other (how they'd screamed and laughed!) up the two flights of stairs to the music room in Petersburg.

"But you're growing stronger," said Molly.

She drove the horse in the gig on some days, and on some days they walked over the scene of soaked green and bog and grey lake. She adventurously sought and hired a boat, and they rowed to the island on Conan's Lake. All

memory of Conan has vanished, but they came on the old stone well, groved in its hazels upon which the rags tied to the twigs are like clinging, drab-coloured leaves. "It must be a wishing well," Molly said when she saw the rags. She tied her lawn handkerchief among the faded relics of the believers, and guided her hand through the nettles—but when she brought the blue-veined palm, cupping a drop of water to her lips, she could not form any wish. Amiel, too, wished nothing, for the grace of her intent bending over the nettles to the water took all his attention. Conceivably, he had not the requisite faith in wishing.

In reality, Conan's is not a wishing well, but one in repute for the cure of rheumatics—in even better repute than a box of doctor's white ointment.

He had been hitherto a demonstrative, rather than a passionate lover. There had been an unsure hanging back, and then an incredulous snatching in his passion, an amazement that she suffered him—or there had been a silent desperate assault as though she might resist him—all of these happily unintelligible to the eager, virgin Molly, and all followed by his rapid exhaustion and by other reactions less explicable to her. But the memory of all such racked nights was lost in one September night when he cried in astounded wonder, "I love you!" and his arms went round her. Her hand lay on his heart and, in the quiet night, the uproar of their bodies' throbbing ran down in unison and they were asleep together.

On the steps of the Celtic cross that stood like a memorial to the dead against the line of dark trees that hid the lake—on an evening of lurid sun menaced by storm clouds—she heard about the wild night of the Inter-Varsity Boxing which had been won by A. Radovsky, the youngest com-

petitor, against N. Macdonald of Glasgow University.

"Tell me something more," she said, and she heard about the illicit visit to the circus and the two rounds he stood up against the Highland Hurtler. He told it with interest and some animation, even with faint zest. He was perfectly at ease telling it. In sympathetic or intimate company he must always, she thought, have talked easily and naturally and without reserve, as a flower naturally exposes its heart to the sun. Together, their arms linked in the gently wild autumn weather, they wandered over the smiling, sunlit landscape of his childhood and youth. There were the toasted scones for tea in Edinburgh, and the grave professors, travelled half across the world to sit with his grandfather in the leather armchairs among the books in the study. There was his first visit to the opera in Munich, and there was his wonderful winter in Petersburg when he was twenty, and, there was Vanya. He guided her with perfect accuracy over his year, but she was prepared for something besides accuracy. Bitterness and wild regret would have melted her heart. There was neither. There was his youth, he seemed to say, that sunlit landscape, how happy and beautiful to see! She saw the boy, sunny and equable, neither morbid nor peculiarly egoistical, personally fastidious, preferring order to disorder, a little too fondly possessive of his belongings—the young man of whom Vanya, who scarcely knew his own hat from another's had said "He owns too deeply." She saw him ingenuous and affectionate, thriving richly in the sheltered domesticity to which his every instinct turned. Bathed in the light from that landscape, she turned to him, almost believing that it was the youth, sunny and equable, who walked beside her and the future was all to make. They were again on the

steps of the stark cross, again on an evening of lurid sun and incipient storm. They began to walk up the flagged path between the herbaceous borders to the French window of the drawing-room. He tightened his arm round her to halt her.

"Let's stop here," he said, "and look at that window. Can you see the firelight through it? It's our fire, waiting for us. I think firelight through a window is the loveliest sight there is."

"But it isn't ours really. We ought to be thinking of the future, Amiel. Have you made any plans?"

He did not answer.

"It'll be three months soon. I hardly think we can stay on here after the middle of October."

He still did not reply.

"We might go abroad after the New Year. I've had a letter from Aunt Rosetta—"

"Damn, damn, damn!" he burst. "Must we talk about it?" His face twitched in a spasm. His hands were wet and shaking.

They had amused themselves by picking the gooseberries, raspberries, and currants and, after them, the plums, yellow and purple, for jam and bottling. This was always done by the old Master and Mistress, and Connolly and Terry had enough on their hands with the vegetables. Or, if they hadn't enough, they were indulgent to the pleasures, however unaccountable, of a honeymoon, and Amiel and Molly picked happily.

Katie, too, was indulgent: "If you'd be so good, Ma'am, you and Mr. Gilchrist, as to shell the peas for lunch—Mrs. Flynn's a bit rushed. She'd be grateful to you for the help. Couldn't you do them in the summerhouse where

you'd get a bit of the sun this morning. You'll find it pleasant."

They shelled the peas and they put the large, hard pears, like stone models of pears, in cupboards to ripen. They laid apples in rows up in the loft, putting each species separate, taking much more care over it than had ever been taken at Dunbeg before. Mrs. Flynn, the cook, went so far in her indulgence as to beg them to incur her deep obligation by collecting the eggs from the nests for her one evening.

"Doesn't it pleasure them," she said to Flannery, "to be doing it, the way they might be two children, the pair of them!"

Indeed Amiel's absorbed delight in these homely tasks was to Molly both unexpected and touching.

"I believe you'd like to stay here forever," she said, and she sighed. It was the day they collected the eggs.

"I love this house," he said, staring at its roof as it appeared over the high stableyard wall.

"Why, Amiel?"

"Because it's our home. We've lived a long married life here, and now we're old." He glanced sideways at her. "How happy that would be, wouldn't it?" he whispered.

She said after dinner, "But there *is* the future. I have to push myself to think about it, but we must think of it."

"Who do you suppose this miniature is?" he asked. He had found in one of the upstairs rooms the miniature of a lady in Empire dress and had been attracted to bring it downstairs with him. The pale, bright colours, and the delicate grace and softness of the sitter were holding him fascinated. He couldn't lay the portrait down.

Now Molly could tactfully carry off a social awkward-

ness. She could tactfully gentle failures. A number of elderly gentlemen, relatives and others, called her "minx" in flattered delight at being managed by her. Her guardian was wax in her manipulating hands. But when her young friends talked of "managing" their husbands, and hinted cynically at sly indulgences of the male vanity by which ends were gained and everyone was left happy, Molly's lip had curled. She would never offer her husband the insult of "managing" him by these complacent means. She might appeal to his self-respect; she would never degrade him and herself by addressing his vanity, even if it should exist. Thus, a remnant sticking to her of her ideal of respect for her husband, she spurned all exertion of wile on him. She would not "handle" or "get round" him. They should speak face to face, without guile, respecting each other's human dignity. It was his physical state which alone daunted and halted her stubborn equal approach to him. She said, "But we'll talk of it again when you feel stronger to cope with things. I don't know about the miniature. It might be a Cosway."

And he glanced at her warily.

He braced himself in the tiny lighted circle—the night-light's flame was wavering. With the strength of desperation he fought his panic. He calculated. The situation presented itself to him simply as the necessity for keeping Molly quiet without her knowing she was being kept quiet. He did not believe she would be very hard to manage. She would be quiet enough if she was kept happy enough. She would be happier with him if she had less occasion to find fault with him. The problem raised his mind, like a crane lifting a bale, from the abyss where it grovelled, sunk in the heavy clay of its experience.

There are few more painful spectacles than the painful daily effort at self-improvement to conform with social standards which are not, or have long ceased to be, either natural or important to the self-improvers. The sudden self-conscious checks, the careful refrainings, the forgetful lapses, the sharp rememberings—Molly was spared none of them. Grotesque and distorted fragments of his broken self were thrown to the surface. From being apathetic to, and bewildered and rather bothered by, his clothes and possessions, he became temporarily exaggeratedly particular. The easy-going valeting of poor old Flannery produced storms of passionate irritation. The things he had paid for in London, which had been bought for him, besides the various expensive gifts Lady Kitteredge, out of affection for his mother, had made him, he had accepted lethargically; but he suddenly showed a jealous possessiveness. He could not bear anyone to touch his things. A handsome pig-skin writing-case with gold fittings which Lady Kitteredge had given him on what she said was his birthday—and he remembered then it was his birthday, the ninth of April—he locked carefully, although he never wrote a letter, and hid it away. He oiled the locks so that the keys in the chest of drawers in his dressing-room would turn. When he lost the keys, a locksmith had to come ten miles from Belturbet.

It drove poor old Flannery demented. Yet he had a liking for Amiel. All the Irish servants, Molly saw, had, unlike Orange, what they themselves would describe as a "softness" for him. She supposed it was what they must take for his entire lack of affectation, or perhaps, the charm of his voice. She did not like to think it might be pity.

What they divined of his troubled uncertainties and his broken locks, they kept to themselves. "Sure he can't help

himself," said old Flannery, after an outburst, and it was true he could not. Soon he forgot to lock the drawers, and the writing-case lay forgotten in the wardrobe, its key, too, lost. And soon he dropped his social self-improvement. It slipped like withered leaves through a sick man's hand too listless to hold them.

Often he made her laugh. There was a double photo frame he told her, in Lady Kitteredge's bedroom, one frame containing a portrait head of her husband and the other the head of a daschund, also dead, and both surmounted by a little vase which her maid kept filled with fresh flowers.

"Oh, I *didn't* know she had that! But I shouldn't have thought," said Molly after reflection, "that you would have noticed a thing like that—not as being funny, I mean—while you were in London, Amiel."

"I did though," he said. "A lot of things I laughed at." What had especially amused him was that the man and the daschund so resembled each other.

He answered her questions with the same candour and mild distant interest about his music and his six months' study at Munich, as when he had told her about the Highland Hurler or his first State Ball. He no longer really wanted to box or to dance at a ball. He had practised, he told her, from three to five hours a day.

"Who was your favourite composer?" she asked.

He told her Mozart.

She ached to have heard some of his work. What did he think had happened to his manuscripts? He shrugged his shoulders.

She got the impression that he had not slaved at his music. It was still a happy exercise, still with the radiance

and the natural bubbling of its childhood. It still weighed lightly on him. He would leave the piano without a curse when his friends called him to come skating. She could not see his youth as hard, concentrated, and dedicated. There had been a softness and a too-sweet docility there. He would have slowly sharpened?

She pondered, "Has he suffered more by having been so young?" Or at the age he was now, thirty-one, would he have sustained less injury? But thirty-one is not an age to go into the dark. The thirties are to the sixties what the teens are to the thirties. The twenties are to the sixties what ten is to the thirties. The robustious childhood of the twenties is finished. The thirties, which promised final unshakable adult poise, are trembling adolescence. The teens could not support such an adolescence. It is adolescence with, as it were, the unthinking follies of childhood still unforgiven and still exacting penance. The anguish and heaviness of inadequacy, the searing of doubt, the crushing of isolation, the shortness of time, the harness of responsibility, the vital necessity of appearing adult, the inarticulateness—these have ceased playing, they close in on the terrible thirties. The harness is pushed down on to the shrinking shoulders. Then who will come running in response to the desolate cry? But that desolation does not cry.

The two comforters in stress—thoughtless bodily health and time's immensity—show sudden blank faces. Then if the dark falls, what hope or strength can sustain it? It may be a middle-aged man whom it at last lets crawl out of it. Oh, to be sixty if the dark must fall!

He had grown undeniably handsomer as his strength seemed to increase. Or rather, it was now his handsome-

ness which leaped first to view and gave the first impression, and the brokenness which now gradually swamped the first impression. Molly believed this was a sign that he was improving in health.

She was at a loss, and could not credit it, when she first seemed conscious, under his rocked surface, of an essential calm. It was unaccountable. Forced to contemplate it, she at first almost shuddered. Like the quiet centre of the cyclone, it seemed too monstrous a phenomenon, that little core of calm. Most often it was completely obscured, sunk in his languor, or hedged by his weary irritations. But she came to a nervy relief in accepting the fact of it. Under her poise she was fretted and highly strung. She needed to lay her cheek against stable vital strength.

One early October evening they were in the drawing-room after dinner. He asked her in a casual voice if she played Beethoven's sonata in F. minor. She hardly believed her ears. She had not touched the piano since the afternoon of rain when she had sung "A Voice by the Cedar Tree."

She answered with careful casualness that she did not know the sonata. "But there's a lot of old music in the cabinet. Would you like me to look for it?"

"No, don't trouble," he said.

The music cabinet, like every drawer and cupboard in the house was packed to overflowing with old stuff. Albums of Mendelssohn, Czerny, and Brahms bore Aunt Rosetta's maiden name written in faded copper-plate across the covers. The Mistress, so Katie had informed them, would come in from the garden, and sit down at the piano. She gave musical evenings at Dunbeg during the autumn at which she herself played. Her fingers, roughened by gardening,

and often crippled with rheumatism, had not lost all the ineradicable grounding of the old thorough German school.

Amiel did not come to look through the music. He lit a cigarette and lay back on the fender cushions. Molly found the little sonata in a Beethoven album. She was a good reader. Presently she knew he came and stood behind her, watching the notes. She could not see his face.

He said nothing when it was finished.

"Shall I play something else, Amiel?"

He shook his head and turned away.

That night she again dreamed hatefully. She was standing before him and she was shouting. As she shouted "Maja! Maja!" her anger mounted to a fierce exultation. She screamed it louder, so loudly that she woke. She had not really been screaming. The fire was a redness of lurking embers.

"Are you awake?" he asked in a cautious, burdened whisper.

"Aren't you asleep?"

"No."

They clung together. They were fleeing from their own selves each into the other. Would not the separating flesh melt? Must they still fall back their own sides of the wall? And she thought, "He's taking this way to forget," and she went dead in his arms. He was rough with the limp form. He wildly crushed it, moaning, "I'll keep you, I'll keep you!"

Her mind for the first time took to dwelling on the imagination of Verkhoyt. This active, ardent creature was dogged by an imagination of malignant power. She was never safe from it. She needed balanced reassurance that the world was not so bad as she imagined, she was resolute

with her phantoms, but still they assailed her. They showed her a Verkhoyt to which ignorance brought plentiful horrors, and against which her sole weapon—the cheerful, adult, “It’s not real”—was powerless. She heard the stamp of the ogres over the earth. No wonder that she became a little grave and pensive. Her colours shone no less brightly, but she sparkled less. It was as though she found herself a trifle aloof and abstracted among the safe paths—as though they lacked for her some reality. She would be henceforward inclined to listen rather than to talk, and to smile instead of answer. She appeared the more exquisite for withdrawing by so much.

There was a recess of the garden enclosed by yew hedges, and it might have been invisible for all Connolly or Terry was ever seen to work there. Long ago it had been laid out as an Italian garden. A sundial stood at what had been the meeting of four miniature flagged walks, from which half the stones had been uprooted for use in other parts of the garden. The place was like a little looted drawing-room. Its rare ornaments were gone—transported, or choked by weeds. Some apple-trees had been planted in, like artisan tenants, among the weeds and sickly relics, but they had not flourished. Their few apples dropped neglected to rot on the paths and in the straggling box hedging. Only the wasps were making use of them in a lethargic way under the grey sky and the first winter chill in the wind.

“Aunt Rosetta said in her letter,” said Molly, “that they’re coming to London for Christmas, and I promised we’d be there, too. We could go down to Derbyshire for the autumn and perhaps go abroad, if we felt like it, in the New Year.”

“Christmas,” he repeated.

"I forgot. I suppose you never kept it in Scotland."

"In Orel," he said thoughtfully, "when I was awfully small, we had a tree stuck all over with coloured candles and stars on all the branches. I never forgot it."

"We had a Christmas tree always before Daddy and Mummy died. I remember them, too."

"I only remember one—it was the last Christmas before we went to Edinburgh. I was given a pear in sugar off the tree. I kept it in a little toy horse-and-cart for weeks, until one night mice ate part of it. I never cried for anything as I cried for that."

"Mummy always said those sugar fruits were poison, but one year Daddy bought them. I think it was an apple I got."

"Did you eat yours?"

"No, I kept it till it got so dusty Nanny burnt it. I never forgave her. I wished then I'd eaten it when I longed to."

"I wished that, too," said Amiel.

They stood in childish delight on this morsel of ground of mutual experience. But Molly was leered at mockingly by the future and she always quickly faced her spectres. Or almost always.

"We'll have some explaining to do, Amiel, about one thing and another, but we needn't explain any more than we want to. Our lives are nobody's business." The exploring might have to be passed off as a joke she had known all about before they were married. It was not that she cared what people thought, but she did not mean to look a fool if she could help it.

Amiel had not answered. The track of the path they had chosen ended at a small marble summerhouse, chipped, green, and streaked with damp. A stunted shrub of veron-

ica growing beside the doorway was hung with some belated blue petals. Amiel slowly pulled a flower from the top of the seedy, withering shrub. She saw his face. She made a movement towards him, and then she closed her lips and turned away. She stared steadily at the enclosing wall of the yew hedge beyond the apple trees. It wanted pruning badly. How sad to let it grow so wild! She gave him a long minute. When she turned back to him they walked back without speaking, through the gap in the yew hedge, which had once been an archway, leading from this ruin of a demurely frivolous little retreat.

CHAPTER XI

Orange's sciatica was worse. It was the damp. She found it more of a business than usual, the stumping up the stairs with the pile of Mr. Gilchrist's washed and ironed silk handkerchiefs.

"Shall I take those for you, Orange?"

"If you'd be so kind, Miss Molly. Beautiful silk these are. Mr. Gilchrist's things are all very handsome."

"Yes."

"And all so new."

The drawer where he kept his ties and handkerchiefs was in the mathematical order which was his pleasure with his possessions at this time. His ebony brushes lay on the dressing table. He had a beautiful ebony fitted pigskin dressing-case.

On top of the chest of drawers were placed neatly a bedroom candlestick and matches, an old French china clock, silent for years, and a book. She recognised the book.

** The face of all the world is changed, I think,
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul
Move still, oh, still, beside me—*

It was as irresistible as picking up one's old photograph, stumbled upon by accident in the inexorable present.

*Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink
Of obvious death, where I, who thought to sink—*

"No, how could I have? To *him*? She wryly turned the page.

*Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart
Unlike our uses and our destinies.
Our ministering two angels look surprise
On one another, as they strike athwart
Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art
A guest for Queens to social pageantries,
With gages from a hundred brighter eyes
Than tears even can make mine, to play thy part
Of chief musician.*

A sonnet marked with her emphatic pencil signal of adoption was:

*Belovèd, my Belovèd, when I think
That thou wast in the world a year ago—*

and also

*When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
Until the lengthening wings break into fire
At either curvèd point,—what bitter wrong
Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
Be here contented?*

To see him with a book would have astonished her. She had asked him one day if he had loved any books. After a pause so long that she had begun to talk of something else, his lips moved and he murmured: " 'I would gladly have given up all the bishoprics in Christendom for Manon.' " But Molly had not read *Manon Lescaut*. Two other titles he remembered were *Mr. Midshipman Easy* and *Carrots*.

She had an impulse to take the *Sonnets* and hide them out of sight. But his fit of jealous possessiveness of his belongings was only just over, and she dared not risk it.

She sighed, hearing the rustling beginning of the rain like leaves in a wind.

She smiled the muted conspiratorial smile that women smile to themselves; and, passing into their bedroom, she pulled open a drawer. Not all the drawers, even in this room, had been cleared for their reception. This drawer was packed with artificial flowers in wreaths and sprays—the trimmings of the hats of forty summers between girlhood and old womanhood. From under the flowers she lifted out the photograph of the little boy with a ball. She had hidden it there on the first evening because its possession was a secret even from Orange. The clear, contemplative eyes looked out at her. How sturdy and strong he was! The soft, round bared limbs were exquisite.

His father, the General, must have been very proud of him, this shoot of his late maturity. The German grandmother who had been a singer and who wore her jewels in the morning—had she dreamed her dreams, too, for him? Molly's mind went back further and she saw his mother before he was born, waiting for her first baby. That would be very wonderful. No one could guess the wonder and the joy. Then the baby was born. Friends must have driven from their country houses through the immense forests, and tenants on the estate must have gathered, to drink long life and happiness to little Amiel Radovsky. Only the finest linen and lawn had been allowed to touch his skin. Nothing in the house was more important than his drawing of breath.

At Verkhoyt the dead in the deadhouse froze stiff in four minutes.

What plans to ponder for your baby! He would be so close and so new and young. He would be hope. All the

disappointment in a husband was made up for in a son. The desert of silence blossomed in him. She looked at the picture, and, pressing it to her lips, she closed her eyes. She laid it back in its hole among the stiff flowers as though she were laying it in a cradle.

"Where's Mr. Gilchrist, Flannery?"

"He went out to the workshop, Ma'am."

It was one of the disused outbuildings in the yard. Most of these stored the overflow of hoarded accretions from the house. Trunks and cardboard boxes gaped on old hats and satin ball slippers, and even petticoats edged with priceless antique lace. Rolls of carpet stood against the grimy white-washed walls. You could see in a dark corner a rusty sitz-bath and a tandem bicycle on which the spiders' webs were black with dirt. A small lean-to shed against the coach-house wall had been fitted up as a carpenter's shop in which the Master, Flannery told them, would be setting his hand to a bit of work when the fancy took him. Amiel had shown no interest when they came on it together. When Molly in her uncle's old mackintosh, returned by Dr. O'Reilly, and snatched from the hook in the hall, crossed the yard and entered the shed, he was standing at the trestle table on which lay a garden step ladder with one of the supports broken.

"*What* are you doing?" she exclaimed.

"Mending a ladder," he answered, glancing up.

"What on earth for?"

"For Connolly."

He had sawn and planed down a shaft, and was fitting it in place of the broken one. He worked slowly, impeded by the gap in his fingers, but surely and with precision.

"Connolly! Did he ask you?"

"No. I told him I would."

She watched him.

"You're very handy. How did you learn?"

"Are you going to stay? That may be dusty."

"Possibly I can stand an inch of dust," she laughed.

"Can you though?"

He came round the table and rubbed the top of the trestle with his handkerchief. She sat with her elbows on her knees and her hands cupping her face. As a child it must have been her attitude for purpose of vehement thought. Her eyes were stormy violet blue with thought and her eyebrows drew low in a straight line. Her cheeks were crimson from the wet run through the yard. She slowly pushed the tip of her tongue between her lips and held it in her teeth.

The rain pattered on the skylight, but in here it was warm and snug, if close. Even when reading or sewing, her entire concentration gave a tautness to her repose. She too seldom offered such an image of simple beauty undisturbed by some outthrust of her keen personality. The shabby, too-large old mackintosh made her look less immaculate than usual.

The decayed wood of the old frame split at the first nail he drove into it.

"I'll have to make a whole new job of it," he muttered.

"I've failed him, too," she thought. "But it's not too late."

"I wish I hadn't asked you to play that sonata," he remarked, stopping sawing.

"Why?"

"Because I can't get it out of my head."

"I suppose you learnt to carpenter at Verkhoyt," she said both deliberately and tentatively.

He scarcely heard her, for he was wrenching at the nails in the old wood with a screwdriver. The slight effort tired him and he stood still and wiped his face with his handkerchief.

"Keep your head on one side!" he said, "you look as if you were going to ask me for something."

"For what, I wonder?" But she was still thinking about the little boy with a ball:

*When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher—*

"I don't know," he said. "I can't think of anything."

"What did you make there, Amiel?"

"You see, the whole thing's rotten," he said. "What's wanted is a new ladder." He sawed with a certain languor and stopped shortly.

"You're tiring yourself," she said.

"Well, we've been married fifty years today. I'm not young. Did you say something, my old wife?"

"Only to ask what you made there?"

She did not think, "He has been so violated that there isn't the spirit there to put up barriers any more, so he will tell me." She thought, "I must make him understand that he needn't be afraid any more to tell me."

"Not much," he briefly answered her. "Coffins."

"Amiel, you're queer!" she broke out. He had finished sawing and the plane squeaked and whined. "Are you enjoying doing that now?"

His hand halted and his eyes for a moment questioned her. Then he said, "I don't know," with a shrug of the shoulders. "Not much, I suppose."

"Then why do you do it?"

She became impatient.

"Did you hear what I said, Amiel?"

"Yes. It was frightfully funny."

"Funny? How? What do you mean?"

"Never mind. It would take too long to say."

"You're too lazy. I wonder sometimes that you take the trouble to breathe."

An extraordinary feeling was rising in her. It was not tenderness, it was not pity. It was excitement. She did not know what it meant.

"Oh, stop that plane," she said, "it goes through my head!"

He stopped obediently and, coming round the table, he stood leaning against it beside her and lit a cigarette.

"This is grand," he said.

"What is?"

"Being able to stop working and smoke."

"Were there women there, Amiel?"

She watched keenly the mystified look clouding his face. "Is that really what you want to talk about?" it said. She kept her eyes on him.

"There were very few women prisoners," he gave in as she knew he would.

"How many? Tell me."

"I remember five. They all died in the first years of their sentences, except one."

"Was she Maja?"

"Maja?"

But she began to stammer. "She was your friend, you said. She's so m-much on your mind. It's a pretty name. Is it R-Russian? Maja."

She was not screaming it as in her dream. But Gribby would have recognised that ebbing colour and that little

smile. It meant an anger which had kicked clear of scruples so that it felt and looked like joy. "Watch out, my lady, or you'll come to a bad end through your temper!"

"Maja," he said in a painstaking voice, "was not a prisoner. She was Simtsoff's girl."

His mouth worked.

When Molly was seven she had, from the exultant peak of fury, hurled the nursery cuckoo clock into the fire as it announced bedtime. The instant after, storming the grate round the conflagration of a love, "I won't have it burnt!" she screamed. "Save it!" But the flames had licked higher.

Seventeen years later her wits were quicker. She did not storm. She gave Amiel a long measuring look of complete self-possession and she said, "As a matter of fact I'm not interested to know who she was. Does it matter? I don't know how I could bring up all that ugliness to spoil our afternoon."

"Perhaps Maja was ugly," he said, struck. "I daresay you'd think so. You wouldn't want her near you."

"No, and that's why I won't have her. I shouldn't have mentioned her. I was ridiculous, Amiel. I thought you oughtn't to have to bear things alone, but I see I was wrong. It can't help to discuss them. What would be best would be to forget them. But if you can't do that—isn't it possible to bury the hideousness out of sight? Or must we have it in the room beside us, poisoning everything between us?"

He gave a rather wild look round him. If they had been in the drawing-room, the brocade screen or the Venetian glass vases might have retrieved and steadied him. But there were only the planks and the smell of sawdust. Where was the plane? Simtsoff would be along to see how the work was going. No, that was nonsense.

"Maja is buried," he explained. "She's dead. It's I who am in the room beside you." The cigarette had gone out in his hand.

This was the moment that she looked at him, not as a man and her husband, and not as a being in ashes, but as a sick creature who asked for all her care. Care was perhaps all he needed to recover all that was lost. The hope soared in her. She turned a bewitched gaze on the future and received a dazzling light in her face from it. Her eyes forever turning from swamps filled with dogging shadows of demons, and lifted to ideal mountain peaks as shadowy, she travelled, this sentient atom of beauty, keeping with much slipping the beaten road of common sense where others plod more heavily.

"Darling Amiel," she said, "that's all that matters. You're with me. We're with each other. We're beginning something new. What's done has been done. Nothing can make it any different. The door of that room has been closed. But there are rooms that you and I will find gorgeous things in. They're waiting for us. This is a silly place to talk in. Just look at my hands! Come back to the house and we'll wait in the drawing-room for tea. Aren't you coming?" she asked as he turned his back. "You're not going to bother with that old sawing are you?"

"Yes, you run away and get clean," he said. "I'll stay and finish sawing. I might break a cherub in that room in there."

"What are you talking about, darling?"

"You were so raging. You couldn't stand it. You lifted it as you'd touch a baby. It wouldn't bleed if it was thrown down and its legs broken, would it? You could flog it without bones showing."

"My dear one," she said, sliding down from the trestle and coming to him. "You must know that I'd smash all the Sèvres that ever was made if it could save one human being from that. But we must see things in proportion."

He took her hands and threw her arms off him. Amazement flushed her cheeks. Her lips parted, but she could not speak. The next instant, he held her frantically while he pleaded, "Molly, forgive me! You must find me so stupid and horrible. Do you want me to explain? You have so much. You've been so safe always, you've had such comfort. All your dresses—how many are they? Your lovely jewellery. That's when I can't bear it."

"You silly, you don't want to wear my frocks and my jewellery, do you?"

"She had a necklace. It was wooden beads painted red. It was the only thing she had of her own, and he took it and burnt it."

Moved, she had begun to soften in his arms. That sweet, tall body flowed against him into a singleness of smoothness and softness that was as warmly vibrant as a cat's tail, and as boneless. But at his last word, it cruelly hardened between bony protuberance and sharp angles.

"Oh, don't!" he cried.

"I don't think, Amiel, you had the right to marry me. Why did you?"

"You know why."

"Because I married you, I suppose you mean. Say it if it gives you any satisfaction!"

"I mean," he whispered, "that the only thing I had any strength to want was to be with you."

"I thought that was true."

"You know it is. You know if you were gone I'd have nothing. How can you help knowing?"

She was touched by the simplicity of this and she rested her head against his shoulder.

"How is it," she said, sadly smiling, "that we can hurt as if we hated each other?"

"Oh, if you hate someone you don't hurt them much. If you want to turn knives in someone, love them!"

"I never saw anyone's pupils dilated like yours, Amiel. They look as if they were once dilated so wide they could never quite contract again."

"How revolting! I *loathe* the look of myself!"

"Have you ever loved someone and turned a knife in them?"

"I remember I loved my mother very much. I killed her."

"Tell me one thing," she said against his shoulder, "and then I'll never mention it again. It would hurt more not to know. That woman, whoever she was—Maja—did you love her more than me?"

Katie's voice calling the ducks, and their animated gossip in the puddles of the yard reached her through the drip of the rain that blurred the skylight.

"No!" she said. She put up his hand and pressed it against her mouth. "Don't tell me the ignorant little fool I am! Forget that I asked that! I'm not really so ignorant or such a fool. You may say I've always been too comfortable, but that doesn't mean I've a mind wrapped in wool. As a matter of fact I'm considered a good deal too knowledgeable in some quarters—not at all the model of what a nice, ignorant young girl should be. I read things in my teens that lots of husbands would have fits if their wives read. So put that in your pipe and smoke it, before you imply again

that I'm a swaddled baby! Listen! I know there were ways you all consoled yourselves. If they did console you then I haven't a word to say, except that you ought to forgive yourself, because I forgive you. Do you understand? There's no reason I should know any more. There's nothing I can say about Maja. I—I'm sorry for her. Only I don't want her. I don't want to know anything about her, or even to think of her."

"Molly!"

Her nervous spate of words halted, and she regarded him inquiringly, her brows raised. Then she moved to release herself from his arms. She struggled, bracing her hands against him. They swayed and cannoned into the trestle which fell with a smack of wood to wood. Molly was dazed with anger and amazement. It was no more than habit which kept her voice from screaming.

"Let me go, Amiel, how dare you? Are you mad?"

He was much stronger than she had supposed.

"Amiel, if you don't let me go—do you realise you're hurting me? You great rough beast, how can you be so despicable?"

She stood still, all at once, in his arms and spoke with cold composure.

"You're not master of yourself. You ought to be thoroughly ashamed. Once and for all, are you going to stop holding me and let me walk out of this shed?"

"No," he said hoarsely. "I'm going to tell you."

"I refuse to speak to you or listen to you in this mood."

She worked with her hands at his fingers locked in the small of her back.

"I refuse to stand this," she said "You can't behave reasonably, and so you think, I suppose, that by reverting to

the behaviour of a drunken bully—you can't frighten me! I utterly despise you. Not content with trying to unload on your wife things that any decent man would keep to himself, you treat me as if we were both savages. Wife-beating would suit you—All *right*, I'll stay. There's no need to crush my ribs in—please don't try to frighten me! Please, darling! I won't run away. Yes, I'll listen. What are you going to tell me, Amiel?"

"About Maja."

CHAPTER XII

Molly walked over the sloping fields. The country had the flat stretches of the bogs and the cobblestones of the hills. The fields slope both up and down. The lakes lie at varying altitudes. You may have the simultaneous view of the Town Lake hugged in a hillock and, on a level below it, the Deep Lake with its islet of low trees and bushes. The lakes are too small to have geographical names. The Devil's Spit is the prettiest of them, but they have no grandeur of beauty. Though lonely they are not desolate. They have, on a cloudy day after rain, a sad-coloured pensive melancholy. The sun, with the wind, gives them a sweet gaiety.

The fields are bounded by low walls of loose stones, among which Molly set her foot to step over into the field beyond. The hay was all taken in. She caught sight of the furtive white cottages squatted humbly. Even their chimneys had an abashed wiggle. A man in front of a cottage stuck the hoe in the earth, and, straightening himself, he leaned on the hoe and lit his pipe. For a long time he remained smoking, surveying the fields, the leaden width, to the right of him, of the Tower Lake, the far mountain outlines and the near grey sky. After the meditation he knocked the pipe out and began hoeing again, not taking it out of himself. The gently blowing wind flapped his unbuttoned coat. All Cullenstown looks on the rain as a blessing with which, by special decree of heaven, the place is enviably favoured. Complaints of it from a foreigner meet

our politely masked contempt. The sun, on the other hand, is suspect. We have heard legends, handed down, of the havoc wreaked by a dry summer.

The fields were slippery with the afternoon's rain, the smell of the short thick wet grass coming up as from a steaming living animal.

"He's right," she thought, "it's peaceful country."

She had been walking quickly, almost running. But what was the good of that? So she began to walk more slowly in her thin house slippers through which the damp was seeping. In the west the sombre raincloud was edged with a band of startling orange light that paled away into a gleaming area far down the sky.

"It's too beautiful. How can there be such beauty too?"

Over the wall a rough bank steeped down to the road that went through the bog. The wind played over the desert of sand-coloured rushes. The bog pools at the road-sides looked still and chilly. It was true, summer was gone. They had stayed here too late.

Along the road ahead of Molly a small figure was moving. It stood out dark against the wide flatness of bog and the flat white road. It was an old woman, remarkably thin. Her greenish black skirt, caked with wet and dried mud to the knees, brushed the road. She walked with a short stump of a branch from which the twigs had been pulled. The ceaseless moving of her jaws, chewing and muttering, made the forked tuft of hairs under her chin wag up and down. Hearing footsteps beside her, she twisted her head in the shawl to sight Molly.

"They found him there," she said, lifting the stump to point at a pool whose black edges showed the smoothness of the turf-cutter's spade, "and I'm saying, 'What would

hinder him to be let lie in a Christian grave the same as another?' ”

A snipe got up from a spot in the rushes close to the road. The old woman shuffled along by Molly's side talking, snatching at company before it left her behind again as it always did too soon when it was young and strong. "The Catholic would not bury him, and the Protestant would not bury him. I'm saying it was a hard thing to deny him rest in the good ground, and him fallen down by the side of the road with his sins on him. Will there not be a prayer spoke for him? My seven shillings I'll be giving them at Carrigallen for candles to be praying for my rest above. For mightn't I fall down walking the road, the way he fell? It's a terrible world, great wickedness is everywhere. Save us and help us! Have mercy! I do hope I have the forgiveness of God."

"I'm sorry I've nothing to give you," said Molly, searching in the empty pockets of the old mackintosh.

"Eh?" the old woman peered sharply and stupidly. "What was he, only a human being? and them above knows all."

The old woman was soon left far behind, and the bog gave way to hilly grass. Off from the road a narrow track wound downward, no more than a goat's track, much used by cattle crossing from one to another of the emerald green grass slopes. Rainwater had overflowed their hoof prints set deep in the mud of the path.

The churchyard wall had been built fairly high but, with the years it had sunk low into the spongy soil. The small black patch of people, and the clergyman in his black cassock, faced Molly, as she checked angrily and doubtfully when she reached the gate, and first saw that the church-

yard was not deserted. A Roman Catholic priest stood to one side of the grave. Two old men with beards leaned on the twisted sticks with which they, like the old woman left behind, tramped the roads from village to village, joining in any free diversion—a wedding or a funeral—that offered. Two sextons and ten or twelve old men and women stood with their heads bowed, but the tombstones were not more ungrieving, impervious spectators, while the clergyman's voice flowed over them. He stood at the head of the grave which had been dug in the middle of the empty grass that cut the churchyard in two. No other grave had been dug there. The wind blew at the priest's and the clergyman's skirts, and at the grass blades on the heap of uprooted sods which waited to go back where they belonged. Coming over against the wind, out of the glow of the half engulfed sunset, six wild swans—

THE TWELFTH NIGHT

"Mr. M'Clane!"

broke formation and dropped, one by one, down to the receiving surface of the lake where their cries ceased.

"Mr. M'Clane!"

He gazed up slowly. A dart of agonising pain shot through his right upper arm as he changed his position.

"Mr. M'Clane, come over a minute, will you please! It's important."

He got up from the table and staggered, feeling giddy when he stood. The pain in his stomach from cold, or from his compressed hunching over the table, was there again. The small of his back was not cold, it had a dull heat, and he felt as though a little motor were busily whirring there. When he moved, pain streaked down his thighs sharply and then dulled.

"Bring the candle," Christina's voice said, and his surface was pricked by her tone's suppressed excitement. He took the candle off the table.

"Mr. M'Clane, her head was flat on its side, just the same as always and I saw it move. She moved it. It wasn't the vibration—I'll take my oath ("oat," she said). It was like a person asleep. Don't you know, when they'll fidget themselves, how they'll roll the face a wee bit aside into the pillow before they drop off to sleep again. It was like that."

He approached into the orbit of the sick, sour smell from

the bed. Christina watched his approach with a motionless eagerness so fixed and intent that it looked greedy. Not that he saw it. His eyes were like looking through smudged window panes. He blinked, squeezed his eyes tight, and opened them.

"What do you think of her?" Christina whispered.

He thought that the dark streaks on the yellow face under the canopy looked as though mud had coagulated under the drawn, drained skin. Continuous swabbing had not prevented the lips and chin from becoming a mass of mattery sores. Through the hanging open mouth, the lips invisible under encrustations, her rank breath was drawn and expired.

Michael's jaws ached. His tongue felt thickly furred and it moved stiffly. His lips, too, were so cold they would hardly form words. He said: "I can't think she moved."

"Perhaps I was mistaken," said Christina. "'Twas the vibration after all, maybe." She spoke a little louder than was natural because of the cotton wool plugging their ears.

"I've failed with her," he said.

"You mustn't worry too much over what's past," said Christina. She believed he was thinking of his marriage and as she said it she leant towards him with a beating heart, from her chair at the head of the bed.

"In our flat in Prague one day," he said, "I found one of her best party handkerchiefs lying on the stairs made into a rat with big ears and a tail—you know those handkerchief rats. A pimply little horror about three, the concierge's child, started howling, saying that she'd made it for him. I let him keep it."

"You can't take all the blame to yourself," said Christina. "It takes two to make a marriage the kind it is."

"But she made that rat for that child. When I think how much of her—what was really her—I've had to miss out! I know too much of her—that's what the trouble is. I want to get it all, and I know perfectly well that that would kill the picture more dead than it is already. As a portrait of *her*, its dead as mutton. I'm incapable of judging whether there's any life in it viewed as a portrait without relation to her."

Christina had sat back, the avid excitement of sympathy smoothing itself into the pallid, suppressing neutrality of her face. She watched him as he stood staring down at the face on the bed. His expression was morosely considering. She took the candle from him for he held it forgetfully.

"Other people," he said, "can get wonderful portraits from life. Why haven't I got her? Granted that its easier to paint a rock than a bubble—granted that the rock makes a better picture than the bubble—still you ought to be able to make a reality of that sort of bubble-like unrealness. Besides, unrealness isn't necessarily artificiality. She hadn't an artificial atom in her, but I've made an artificial figure of her. I've accented her wrongly. I've left out the handkerchief rat. I thought I couldn't have missed her, but she doesn't breathe for me. She's not warm."

He stuck his mittened hand in his overcoat pocket. Christina had cut the fingers off one of a pair of Monsieur's grey woolly gloves to make a mitten for his pen hand. He slowly realised that he was cold.

Christina to-night did not wear her green lace-stitch jumper with the brown cardigan. The house was now crammed full, not of needy students and teachers, but of refugees from large country houses in the battle areas, and from prosperous suburban houses, who were paying reck-

lessly, from cautious reserves of ready cash, for corners of rooms shared among two or more families. Christina was thus possessed of more money than she had ever owned in her life before. And the money was all her own. There was no one to say what should be done with it. Achille did not count. She had not even shown him the money she was getting. She could ask, for half a room, more than she used to get for the whole room, and the money was given with tears of gratitude. These rich ladies had gone off their heads—they had forgotten the value of money. If enough of it could buy them a length of bare floor to lie down on, and a bowl of lentil soup to eat, they cared no more for it than for pursefuls of dust. But Christina cared.

She kept it all inside the body of a child's big nigger doll which hung from a nail in the kitchen wall. By pulling a string the great, grinning mouth could be made to open and swallow and there was a hole in the back, under the striped coat, through which the swallowed article could be retrieved. Through this hole Christina, when the kitchen was empty, secretly pushed the amounts she was receiving. The doll had belonged to her son Dan when he was six. Achille would stand opposite it, twisting his face into evil shapes in defiance of the nigger's grinning grimace, but he would never touch the doll. He had a horror of it. No other hiding-place she could have contrived would have been safe from his capricious explorings. When she was alone she would push her fingers through the hole in the back, and what they felt there they would grasp with an almost anguished clutch. The rims of the coins bit into her palm, leaving red dents, but it hurt more to let the coins drop back.

To think she used once to let a tenant owe for weeks, before she found the assurance to send him packing! If he

took it humbly, and pleaded, she could deal with him without any trouble, but if he blustered, she had been cowed. She had shrunk from unpleasantness with women guests even more than with men because they knew better how to cow her. But now, only yesterday, without a second thought, she had ordered the mother and daughter in the room next the M'Clanes out of the house because their ready money was exhausted. The two women came from an old castle in the north in which their family had been settled through centuries. Their money had been flown secretly out of the country, along with all the money in the banks, the week before the invasion. Christina had listened while the mother expostulated, trying, as such ladies will, to hide that she was crying, and the daughter had first appealed to Christina and then tried to wither her with scorn. Christina had stood indifferently. She had since rented the room to the family of four, a father, his daughter and her two children, who were glad to pay extra for a room to themselves. She continued indifferent when Miss Jardine, not saying a word to her, took the mother and daughter into her own room. It was known that Miss Jardine kept somewhere in her room all the money she used to receive in quarterly cheques from England. Let her take those two in and pay for them if she wanted the trouble! Was she so rich then? Christina meditated raising the rent of her room though it was already doubled.

But what was there to buy with her money? It was no use to her in the foodshops. She could not buy what there was not to sell. She could afford six times the price for a stale loaf that had to last for a week, but it infuriated her to have to pay it. Eating had never been a pleasure to her. Even Monsieur's clever dishes she did not appreciate. She

preferred a cup of strong tea and a piece of bread and butter eaten standing at the kitchen table. It might be that her stomach had years ago contracted to adapt itself to the little she gave it. At least it did not now crave and torment her. She heard dimly, through the inward exaltation in her, that children were falling dead in the streets from starvation. No, it was not the foodshops which interested her.

One morning, months ago—in last Christmas week—she had been coming back from her marketing and, stopping to stare at the windows of the little lingerie shop at the corner of the square, she had suddenly gone into the shop. She had not dreamt of even wishing she could buy anything. With the heavy string bag weighing from her arm, she had wandered about in a dazed way, staring and touching. The shop's single floor had been full of women buying Christmas presents of the delicious nightgowns and panties. The pretty young assistants were flying about gracefully and smiling. How very happy those girls must be, she had thought.

This afternoon the shop had been empty. The wooden shutters were up over the broken windows, but it was open. That was sensible. Food was not the only thing that was important to buy. Two of the young assistants sat talking in high, quick voices in the light of candles. After all the pale faces she had seen, their faces dazzled her with a brightness of lips and cheeks, although their eyes looked sleepless.

But when Christina saw herself in the grey velvet house-coat, zip fastened from the hem of the wide skirt up to the high neck-line, she had felt afraid. Was she really so wicked as that yet? And in terror she had quickly taken off the house-coat that made her too beautiful to be resisted. Then

they had shown her a red wadded dressing-gown like Miss Jardine's pink one. But, in the street, she had turned back into the shop and she had exchanged the red dressing-gown for the grey velvet house-coat.

The long, close grey sleeves hid her arms, but they almost made up for that by the warmth they gave. She was angry to realise that she had not thought of buying new shoes to go with it. She tucked her feet up on the bar of the chair by the sick bed, where the wide velvet skirt hid them.

The faces of the young shop assistants came into her mind with their bright cheeks and lips. She did not know how to achieve that brightness, but she knew of another shop. One day, a long, long time ago, Mrs. M'Clane asked her, "Where is the nearest place I can get my hair done, Madame?" What could they do at that place for Mrs. M'Clane's hair and face now?

Only had it stayed open? She was filled with excitement at the idea of it, and she thought, "To-morrow afternoon!"

For now all her time was her own. Those of the refugees who preferred to do their own marketing mostly cooked for themselves on the kitchen stove, Christina charging them extra for the coal used. For the others Achille cooked as usual, and this left her the mornings for the transient trance-like intervals which had become her sleep. Twelve days ago she used to drag herself into bed, so tired that the night was never long enough and the alarm clock would wake her with tears of protest starting in her eyes. She had been too tired to dream. But these light morning dozes were no more than a continuation of her dream-like days. She passed from thinking into dreaming, with no suspension of the thought, and when she woke there was no break from the dream.

The stair matting was caked with the thawing slush brought in from the streets. She saw it vaguely. "Let them sweep it up if they don't like it!" As for the kitchen, it was like a refuse heap. She went into it for meals with Achille and Lena which did not take her long. "Let them wash up what they dirty!" she said to Lena. Who else was going to do it? Who was going to bother to keep their rooms for them? Let them clean the bath and the lavatory if they wanted those clean! They might brush up the plaster shaken down from the walls and ceilings if they cared! But they didn't care. Nobody cared.

The refugees were mostly women with their young families, and old men. When Christina met the women on the stairs or passages she smiled at them vaguely across the continuous wall of booming sound. Their strained, tormented faces, how stupid they were! Christina's secret triumph glowed in her when she passed them. Aloud she said, through the wall of sound, "We must trust in God," and she smiled her vague smile. But Christina had ceased to pray. She had forfeited God's attention to her prayers.

She no longer felt tired now that she did no housework. She could not always tell when the nearer barrage ceased, for it was in her ears and her head—a part of the throbbing pain there. But she felt an empty lightness in her body as though she could have floated up to the ceiling. She could dance a waltz round the sickroom this moment as lightly as she had ever waltzed at St. Mary's Hall in the North Circular Road, before she was married. "You're a grand, light little waltzer, Christina," Willie Casey, who drove a taxi, had said.

She was rich. She could buy a pair of grey velvet boots lined with fur and zipped up the fronts.

"What I'm afraid of—" Michael said. She looked sharply at him as her heart jumped at the words, the palms of her hands going wet. She clenched her hands on two folds of the grey velvet skirt. He sat on the edge of the foot of the bed, biting a finger of the fur-lined leather glove on his left hand as he stared in her direction, blindly at the mute eagerness and tenderness of that look. "What I'm afraid of," he said, "is that I've not made a clear enough case for her love for him. Its extraordinary that she loved him. But extraordinary or not, she did love him. Only is it convincing? Or would you say he was too impossible?"

The eagerness and tenderness smoothed itself into the waiting, pale composure of her face.

"I've thought," she said, "that he must have some queer habits. Fourteen men caged up all to themselves in the one shed—didn't he tell her fourteen?—it doesn't take much to guess the ways they'd get into that they mightn't get out of in a hurry. And she's unusual particular in her ways—which he feels. But you've not mentioned anything of that sort."

He seemed dejected and sat chewing the glove finger. "You mean," he said, "that the treatment, as a whole, might be more realistic, less impressionistic. It might. But there are dangers. By emphasising physical disgust existing with physical passion in a character like hers, I risk a too-sensual interpretation of her love for him. I daresay I ought to have faced up to it though. I'll have to consider."

"It's queer the ones you can love," said Christina, "no matter what they are. No matter that no one else in the world might see a lot of them, only yourself. No matter if you've no understanding of them, more than of the man in the moon."

"I suppose so," he said, doubtful at being momentarily deflected. His mind flicked to Cornelius Fluddery, who got drunk and brought the poker down anywhere, and then to Monsieur. A man wouldn't have to be much to seem desirable compared with either of those.

"There's one other thing," he said.

"What's that?" asked Christina.

So long as they talked about what he was writing, he wanted to talk to her. His eyes then never left her face. He waited for her answers to his questions as though he were asking a wise woman his future. Her answers sometimes made his face light briefly, and sometimes they made him depressed and moody. Yet she always tried so hard to give the right answer!

However, if she had been the most important of the literary critics he used once to allude to, he could not now have questioned her more earnestly and wistfully, moving the candle so as to pierce her expression with his anxious gaze. He half noticed the deadness of her hair in the candle-light, as if it was combed but never brushed.

"Would you say the pace is too fast? I'm conscious that I've put the whole six years of her into three months, but has that given an effect of undue compression to the thing as a whole? Or has the speed I'm working at made for an unconscious compression? Are you made to feel the need for expansion? Is the scale too small?"

What was he talking about? He was gazing at her, waiting for the answer from her. She searched his troubled expression for some clue to the answer that would light up his face.

"Why—no, Mr. M'Clane. No indeed, I'm sure—not at all."

But after all it couldn't have been the right answer. He sighed, and got up from the bed.

"You're not going back to write?" she sent after him somewhat despairingly.

"Oh, Christina, I'm crammed, bursting up to the neck with it! I'm vibrating like a telegraph pole." She looked at him dubiously. "If it could come out except in words! I haven't another consecutive sentence left in me. I've got to go out and walk about till I'm filled up with words again."

"I don't wonder at that," said Christina. "I never in my life long, saw someone write like what you've done these five days past. I thought, 'He'll write his hand off!' You'd stop for a turn about the room, and then you'd be back at it again. I've said to myself, 'I'm glad I haven't to write like that!' And then I look up and I seen you fallen asleep at the table, your head on the paper. You were like a man—"

"Tight," snapped Michael, slightly irked by some querulousness in her voice under the words.

"A man bewitched. And how it all comes out of your head and on to the paper I'm sure is beyond me to say."

"It's as if it had been working itself out in my head without my knowing it for six years. I feel I'm remembering something, not working it out. In essence, it's unchanged since I got the germ of it in Russia that time. It might be six months since I began the first draft, instead of six years." And he wondered fleetingly where the few pencilled pages of the beginning of the first draft, in a sixpenny black-covered exercise book, had got themselves to.

"Do you mean," said Christina, "that it's like as if it had all happened, and you're only writing down the truth of it? Or is it all set to happen, the way the fate, they

say, is marked in your hand, and you can't change it?"

There was something worried about him.

"I like to know what I'm getting at," it came out. "I distrust opening a track that I don't see where its leading."

"Yes," she said and her secret ecstasy gave a jump in her. But was this the time to show him a corner of it? "If what you see ahead of you is something that will be beautiful," she said, "you like to think of it, and of coming nearer it—"

"That incident of the sonata in Chapter X—I don't know how that got in or what it's doing. I may take it out. I'll see later on how it strikes me." She saw his hand go to his coat pocket where he never remembered there could be no cigarettes. His face fell as usual. "I wish," he said, "I'd tried to get some chewing gum this morning."

"I'll put it on the list for you in the morning."

"Goodbye, Christina!"

"Where'll you be going?" she asked incredulously.

"I told you. For a bit of a walk. I shan't be long."

"For a walk!" she said.

From the other side of the thin partition between this room and the next, an old man's voice called fractiously. It was the invalid grandfather who, with his daughter and her two children, occupied the room after the mother and daughter had left it. "No, you're dreaming! That wasn't the siren, it was a car starting."

A woman's immensely wearied voice said, "No, no, go to sleep, darling! That wasn't the siren."

A little listening, wordless moment hung between Christina and Michael. She broke it.

"You're dead tired," she said, leaning forward and laying her hand on his arm. "You'd be better to lie down on your

bed for once and try could you sleep. Do you know what the time is? Coming on to midnight."

It was true he was so tired that to talk strained his throat and his words blurred into each other. He was no longer vibrating like a telegraph pole, but he was like a car engine switched off and cooling down. Each moment he stood there beside the bed was chilling down a spark of exhilaration and excitement. He moved to the writing table and, as though he raked the embers of a fire for what warmth might remain in them, he fingered the pages. The writing was thickened and illegible, jumping below and above the lines. It looked like a drugged man's delirious scribbling. He had to hold the pen loosely between the first three fingers to relieve the cramp in his hand. He had tried using his left hand but it was too slow.

"Most of these," he read with chilled, dismal distaste, "stored the overflow of hoarded accretions from the house. Trunks and cardboard boxes gaped on old hats and satin ball slippers, and even petticoats edged with priceless antique lace."

It was fourteen years since Dunbeg House had been demolished by order of the Land Commission, and its grounds divided into farmers' holdings. The Italian garden lay under a field of oats on a smallholding.

Christina spoke to his back: "I don't understand," she tried more despairingly to engage his attention, "every part of the story, Mr. M'Clane."

"What parts?" he said, turning sharply.

"I don't understand the bits about the veronica. I suppose that's a part of the mystery, is it?"

"The mystery? What are you talking about?"

"About the woman—the woman with the queer name

isn't it? I've been excited for him to tell what it is about her. It's very clever how you make me want to find that out, Mr. M'Clane."

"Oh, Lord—that! That's been told. It's not a mystery thriller," he said irritably.

"Is it not?" She pondered. "It's a mystery to me then, till I know what was told her in the carpentry shed."

"I tell you, you do know. Oh, its Part I—I forget you've not read it."

"Tell me it."

"O God, no—I'm too tired. I'll give you that chapter to read. Its Chapter IX, the last part in Part ONE."

"Thank you very much, Mr. M'Clane. She's after hearing it now, whatever it is, and what I want to know is, will she pardon it to him?"

She reached to the candle which she had placed by the night-light on the table beside her chair. She would put it out when he was not writing, to save it. But instead of snuffing it, she moved it so that its light fell behind her and made her distinct to him among the sharp black shadows that now obscured the bed—her long, hollowed neck, and tired bosom, and the large, coarsened hands lying in her lap.

It seemed to her that at last he was looking at the house-coat, and her heart beat so that she could not say anything to answer him.

"She," said Michael, "think of what she is!"

Christina glanced at the bed.

"She's a child," she said.

"Yes," said Michael. "She's a child."

"If you'd care for a cup of tea, Mr. M'Clane, I could boil it up for you on the methyated while you'd be waiting."

"No thanks," he said. He found in his coat pocket his other fur-lined glove.

"You're too tired," she said. "Wouldn't you stay and rest the night out, if you're to work again all to-morrow?"

"Why should I work to-morrow?"

"Is it your hand," she exclaimed, with an eager start, "given out on you?"

"It's not—not yet. But why should I give my hand hell? What do I think I'm doing, Christina?"

"Mr. M'Clane!" She was stupefied.

"This putrid book of which I loathe every word—"

"And yesterday night!" she articulated, dazed with astonishment. "Only yesterday night—"

"Well, what of it? This is to-night and I'm sane. I see plainly that my book is nonsense. Shall I tell you what I feel for it? Ugh! I want to shake it off. It's extravagant. It's pretentious. It's shallow. It's incongruous. It doesn't fuse. I'm *sick* of it."

Christina understood the voice. In the early months of her marriage to Monsieur he had not understood English very well—or perhaps he had pretended not to understand while he moved his pots and pans about the range, and she spoke, watching him: "Little grasshopper of a man! Little lepping crumb of a man, not as high as my shoulder! And it's him I'm married to! To a little joke of a man that lives for cooking food as no sane woman would!" It had given her relief, even a sour pleasure, thus to mock her humiliation and the failure of her life.

"The trouble," went on Michael, "is not merely that I'm making a hash of bringing it over. It's not a simple case of abortion. The trouble is that I'm spending myself trying to

make a job of something—I could write something worth while! There's a little masterpiece I could do of pathos and tenderness that would make your heart cry. And, God help me! I'm writing *Amiel!*"

"You're not yourself." She was bewildered by him, though she was excited by the reference to an abortion which seemed very intimate. "You'll be at the table there again to-morrow."

"Ah, there's where you're wrong," he said. "I shall be untied from it to-morrow. How would you like to go about with a great thing—like an amorphous jelly mass of protoplasm it is—tied to you, cumbering you wherever you move. I'll have cut the cord to-morrow and it'll float clean away like a little bubble. And I'll feel so light and clear."

"Five days," she said in bitter, covered fury, listening to his laughing, as it dawned on her. "Blind and deaf you were! You didn't know did I come into the room or did I go out of it. You cared nothing what was brought you to eat even. I've come up to take your plate and I've seen the food on it cold and stiffening, by your elbow—Ah, where are you going with yourself, now you're after leaving that table? You'll get caught in a raid, sure as God!"

"Not at this hour. We'd have had them over before now if they were coming. They're leaving us very quiet to-night. The big guns are quiet." He took the cotton wool plugs out of his aching ears. They did not really help much and he thought his head would feel clearer without them. He continued to talk in the same loud voice to Christina over the thickness inside his head, as though they both had grown a little deaf. The room shivered with the more distant barrage. "What's that?" he said. It was a far-off sing-

ing hum they had never heard before and did not know what it was. The dreadful unseen activity of the night crept sickeningly into his aching bones.

There was a way she believed she might hold him to stay. The candlelight was on her. Raising her shoulders, tucking down her chin, she smiled the coy smile, teasing with her eyes, that she used to smile at Willie Casey when he would be chasing her round the summerhouse by Thomas Kettle's bust in Stephen's Green, before she was sixteen. To be sure she had never let Willie kiss her when he caught her, because that would have been wrong.

"Mr. M'Clane!"

"What?" he said irritably, without turning.

"I—I bought myself a new dress this afternoon. Do you tell me it suits me?"

"Here—what?" He turned, frowning quickly.

"It's only to remind you—take your gas mask," she said, with all her usual timidity.

"Oh, damn it! I won't be half an hour." Then he rounded the screen, beyond which she heard his infirm steps going to the door. She put out the candle.

The sounding, icy darkness in the street took him. He felt emptied, and as if the cold and the sound of the distant thunder filled him. He had never before felt this sickness of the night. The cold was damp with spring. There was no real breath of spring in the air. A keen nose might smell a faint acridness of smoke. But the softening of the edges of cold was like a kind hand touching him and drawing him along through the unlit streets. He had developed a crabwise way of shambling, crossing one heavy, uncontrolled foot over the other.

Not a star showed above the invisible, dripping roofs.

The slush he floundered through, splashing his trouser legs, did not crackle with ice, but all the same his feet grew colder. "It's good for me to walk," he muttered. "I used to enjoy walking." He stumbled wretchedly on the cobblestones. "What a lull in the firing to-night! Everyone in the houses fast asleep in their beds. A dark, dark night. No one about." Oh, his legs! "Will they never feel right again? I couldn't try to run without tumbling."

"I beg your pardon."

"My fault," said Michael. The woman's voice had been young. They passed each other in the clammy darkness.

"What a book! Lord! You fool, *fool*—you can't help it, I suppose. But *lord!* It's your old, wild imagination got you again! Why the devil can't you keep it at home? The common, human themes it could illuminate! They're good enough for anyone. It's not a bit wise to go beyond them."

"Can't you walk straight? Are you tight?"

"My fault. This darkness! Why can't you find your *genre*? That scene in the workshop, that's a gem! Force the situation, theatricalise the development, take the body out of it!"

The angle of the wall he was negotiating broke off sharply into space, his hands feeling the jagged brick edges. In the darkness which he had thought was the wall's solidity, two very dim tiny lights were moving slowly, about a foot from the ground. Then he must be seeing over the wall. He put up his hand and ran it over the jagged top of the wall, which was level with his chest. So this was where he had got to! He had come a long way. The bombed ruins of the power station were close by, across the river. The light nearest him slowly rose, as the holder straightened from stooping.

"The firewood's all gone," a woman's voice said, with a quivering hostility. He could not see her, for she held the light between them.

"Speak louder, I can't hear you," he said.

"There's no more firewood left. It's no use trying to find any more."

"I'm not trying. Is that what you're looking for?"

"We're not looking for anything. What should we be looking for?"

The second light slowly rose, and came nearer. "What should we be looking for?" said an old man's voice, and it broke into wheezy coughing.

"Was this your house?" asked Michael.

"Yes," said the woman nervously and belligerently. "Now go away! There's nothing to find here—there's nothing but rubble."

"What are you doing here?"

He heard her sob.

"We had the ground-floor room," said the old man's voice. "I'm standing where the bed stood and over in the corner, Sir," the light waved, "is where the dresser was. Dry wood burns up, you can't save it. They're only ashes now. But tin's another matter. Would you tell me, Sir, if it's true that a tin would be melted? I read that a bowl of little fish all alive was taken from a house a plane crashed into."

"A tin?" said Michael. "What sort of a tin?"

"Well, if the tin—"

"Stop it, you fool!" said the woman murderously. "Well, are you going to stay there all night?" she said in Michael's direction. "You've come late if you think there's anything left to pick up."

"You can see we're not trying to find anything," the old man said.

"Are there craters ahead on the road?" Michael asked.

"There's a big crater on the outside of the path a bit farther along. Walk close by the houses and you'll miss it," she answered.

He looked back, after going a few steps. The two lights were moving slowly, held about a foot above the rubble.

He stumbled over the broken pavement and felt his way along with his hands on the houses.

"My f——" But it was only some kind of a curtain blowing out from a ground-floor window which had brushed his face. Through the paneless window, he looked into the little dimly firelit room. A long beam like a rafter, scorched at the two ends, leaned against the wall beyond the fireplace. In the centre of the room a woman kneeling at a wooden wash-tub full of smoking water, held a naked baby not more than a few minutes born. She wrapped the baby hastily in its blanket and made towards the window. He moved on.

"Watch where you're going, can't you?"

"My fault. Where am I exactly?"

"On the quays. Left bank."

"Do you know of a cafe open near?" he asked.

"On the right bank—turn left after crossing the bridge. They'll be open. You needn't mind the crater, it's boarded over."

After cautious crossing of the empty road, over the broken tram lines, he was on the bridge.

"My fault. I'm sorry!"

But the person leaning on the bridge parapet above the invisible floating ice, made no answer.

Michael was ravenous. There couldn't be a thing inside him. "I could do with a drink, too." But to cram himself with food was what he wanted. He had no money in his pockets after giving all the change to Christina that morning. He had given his own money with it by mistake and she had forgotten to return it to him. But perhaps they would let him stay in the café and rest till they closed. The thought of the walk home made him feel hopeless, he would never get that far.

He sat and stared at the two bearded old men who stood against the little counter. They, too, were not eating or drinking anything; they just stood there quietly. Their clothes couldn't keep out the cold from the poorly fleshed skin that wrinkled over their hands and faces. They stared at Michael from their wan, puzzled faces under their thin hair. They were barge hands, he thought, and he stared back at them. "Lord, you're lucky! To be old and your life's work done! How can you care what happens?" Lucky, lucky old men!

At the table next to Michael a young soldier, a captain, was sitting alone. With his right hand he slowly crumbled a small crust of bread and swept the crumbs into a little mound. As often as the top of the mound fell down, he carefully and methodically built it up again. His pale face was deeply thoughtful. Michael watched the crumbs hungrily. "Lord, it's grim to feel so inferior to that chap! I'd hardly count to him as being a man. He wouldn't see me any more than a louse on the floor."

The young captain scattered the crumbs and stood up. He had already paid what he owed and as he passed Michael's table on his way to the door, he glanced at the clock above the counter.

"Can you tell me if that clock's right?" he asked Michael, stopping briefly. "My watch is smashed."

How, twenty years ago, in the Third Form, M'Clane had flushed and stammered when Moore—J. S. Moore—the games captain and leader of the school, walking by, had singled him out to stop and say a word to!

"It's right by my watch." He felt a longing to take off the watch and offer it to the young captain.

"Thanks. Goodnight." The captain smiled faintly and gravely.

"Goodnight, sir."

Michael leaned back, grinning happily at the two old men, and at the heavy woman behind the counter. Then the café was closing, and too soon he was out in the dark again. He was going back over the bridge, feeling his painful way along by the parapet. His foot came against something. He stopped and getting to his knees he felt the cold bald head lying on the pavement close under the wall. His hands moved over the face and touched the bristly moustache. He felt the wet clothes. The smell of them told him of poverty, but it was all they told him. A person had been leaning over the parapet looking down at the water—or had he been dead? Already in the cold the body was stiffening. It lay there in the dark with only Michael for company, to whom its death was as obscure as its life had been. That book would never be read. And it would never be written.

It was not long that they remained quiet on the bridge together. Michael's paining head was pierced by a rising wail—was it a car starting? He listened. "Oh, damn and blast! Shut up, you moaning devil!" he swore at the mounting and dying wail. Scrambling up, he left the unknown, invisible dead who heard nothing, and he began hobbling

after a thud of firm footsteps going past him. But he couldn't shamble fast enough to catch up. He remembered a dream when he had had to run uphill through water. It felt just like this. He did not know this quarter of the town. "Better make for home and lie down if the bombs start dropping!"

He shuffled along. But which way was it?

"Yes, in here," a man's voice said. Michael's arm was caught and he was turned aside into a doorway. He heard the roaring rush of a plane diving, it seemed behind him, almost simultaneously with a sound like a clap of thunder which reverberated away.

"That's right—straight down the steps into the crypt. There's a lantern half-way down."

He had turned into the side door of the church. By the lantern light he faintly saw the pews, and the glimmer of gilt on the altar rail. The second lantern waved at him from the turn of the steep winding stone stairs. But in the crypt it was quite dark. He advanced slowly. He could find no seats, so he stood. He was not sure if he heard voices, the drumming was so loud in his head.

"Anyone else here?" he asked loudly into the thick silence of the crypt.

He felt his two hands touched and then held by a hand on his either side. The hand on his right was a child's, the other was a woman's thin, squeezing fingers. Were they all holding hands?

They were all sitting on the floor. The cold of the ancient stones crept up and filled him until he could not imagine being warm again. The child slept with her head against his shoulder.

Lantern light flashed down at them. "All clear!" a woman's voice squeaked.

"Bring the light back! Bring that light!"

"What's the matter?" Michael said, scrambling up by pushing with his hands on the floor.

"She's lying here on the floor. Take her shoulders, will you, and we'll lift her out of line of the steps."

"I can't lift her," said Michael. "I'm not strong enough. I'm sorry."

"Then you'd better get out. Where's Daddy's brave girl?" he begged the child who had started to howl.

"I'll send someone down," said Michael.

He met the woman with the lantern coming down the steps.

"Did someone call?" she asked him.

"Someone's fainted down there. And look here, you'll know who to tell—there's a fellow dead on the bridge."

"I don't suppose he'll be the only one," she said.

"A lot of damage done?"

She shrugged her shoulders, looking tired and patient in the lantern light. "Someone fainted? All right, hold on! Here I'm bringing the light!"

Michael and some others straggled out through the side door.

"See that!"

"My God, look at it!"

"It looks like the beginning of sunrise," said Michael, staring at a faint pink glow above the centre of the town.

"Hardly in that direction."

"Do you think Y—— street's got it?" Michael clutched someone in the still clammy, concealing darkness.

"Is that where you live?"

"Yes, it is."

"It's over there where it's coming from."

The voices and forms were lost behind him in the darkness.

He now could not tell how he moved. He stumbled and lurched, feeling that he was running. He took the direction without thinking of it. "If the house has got it," he thought, "I shall rush into the flames."

Turning a corner he looked down the short length of a street where every house was blazing. There was a shop, it was the beauty place where Moira had her hair done. It was exultantly blazing. A man ran past him with a bucket that looked tiny, it looked silly. "Bring water!" he yelled.

"Let go!" Michael tried to wrench himself from the wild hand that held him. He looked into the girl's sharp white face smeared with blood across the cheek, the black holes of nostrils and the pits of eyes in which the glow from the flames was reflected. He implored her, "Let me go! I've got to get home. My house is burning!"

But she dragged him. Her thin body in slacks was stronger than Michael's in his weakening illness. The upper story of the house behind her was in flames. The ground floor had been a shop, and the chinks between the floor boards glowed. Two men had got the trapdoor to the cellar open. It was like lifting the lid from a steaming pot. The girl dropped Michael's hands, calling, "Thank God—they've got a ladder—they're going down."

"There aren't people down there!" he shouted through the clamour of fire from above and below.

The second man to go down the step-ladder into the cellar, his head wrapped in a towel, bawled to Michael,

"No need for another to come down! Stay where you are!"

"The floor will cave in on them," said Michael. The heat from under the floorboards enveloped him as he crouched at the trapdoor's edge, peering down. The girl's hand rested on his shoulder. She spoke in his ear, "Can you hear anyone call?"

Michael listened. The smoke wound up from below. The step-ladder was too short, not reaching to the trapdoor. The man, his head in the towel, who stood on a rung so far down there, had to raise the woman in his arms as high as he could lift her without losing his balance.

"Lean more over!" he called to Michael, choking.

Michael leaned over the edge to ease the woman's weight.

"Take her shoulders!" the girl screamed. The woman's head of matted, bloody grey hair fell back.

"I can't. I'm not strong enough." A shocking weight wrenched Michael's arms. He screamed to the man on the ladder not to let the woman go, but that support was already withdrawn, as the man re-descended. He screamed to the girl and she, not understanding, let go the woman's feet and grabbed Michael round the waist.

It was true that the woman's weight might have pulled him over the trapdoor edge, but with the strong wrenching of him backwards, the weight broke from his arms which betrayed him. His arms clawed empty, and the woman had gone back into the smoke. A man who had run in from the blazing stairs at the back of the shop shoved Michael away from the trapdoor and, leaning over, he yelled down to the two rescuers. The floor was giving. The first man appeared on the ladder carrying a child which the man who had run in took from him. The man on the ladder climbed

out. The girl began to scream, "Mother!" She flung herself on her knees, hanging over the trapdoor. The two men dragged her up, and dragged her light weight between them in a race with the scorching, giving wood of the floor.

Michael staggered after them and got to the door, too. After that, he made his drunkenly crabwise way between houses in flames and under the barrage of flying bricks and stones. But he could never run far enough or fast enough! He turned out of the blazing street, not because it was blazing, but because it was light and his hunted figure could plainly be seen. For the first time his way was blocked. A mountain of debris piled across the road, and beyond it flames were pointing. Beyond that mountain was the little square where he did the shopping. A little lane, known to him, was dark and quiet; and like a skulking night animal, he came, by back streets and alleyways blind with endless smoke, into his own street where all the houses were standing, and he stood on his doorstep as he might stand there on any night in the week. "I know the key is here. Hang it, I know I have it. I won't ring." Automatically he stamped his feet, stinging with cold, on the doorstep. "Fancy having a locked door!" he thought contemptuously. All those houses were standing doorless and windowless and gaping.

Who was beside him on the step? This person inserted a key and held the door open for Michael. A night-light was burning on the hall table and by its shadowy glimmer Monsieur Hamel stood smiling at him, not the least put out. "That's a night out together we've had!" said that smile of fantastic friendliness.

"It's late," said Monsieur, whispering confidentially.

"But both the women are waiting for you. I hope there won't be trouble. Go up softly!"

Michael gave him a haunted look and turned and began the stairs. His feet crunched on broken glass, as cold air blew in through the first landing window. He could hear children crying from an upper floor but he met no one. He learned next day that many of the occupants had gone out in the streets after the raid to be what help they could.

Christina had not left his room. She was standing at the writing-table from which she had taken a page of manuscript in her hand. She had re-lit the candle, which she held in her other hand. It was no chance flame or falling masonry that had killed him out there. It was God, who thus punished her for her sin and cheated her of her triumph. Very well! But it was not God alone who could wreak fury, and who could kill by fire. She tilted the candle.

At the sound of the dragging, uneven steps on the landing, she had only time to slam the scorched page back on the table, her haste shaking candle grease down on her fingers, before the door opened.

"I thought you were killed," she said, amazed. She stared at him, puzzled and doubting what this could mean. "When you went out to-night, I made sure there'd be a raid, and I made sure you were killed."

What did he look like?

"You'd better sit down. You look—" She had been going to steady him by his arm, but the coat sleeve was scorched black and torn. "You smell of the fire." A wild thought excited her. "Are you sure you're not killed?" she half-whispered.

"I should have been. What use am I alive? I'm not worth

saving. Was there a single other man, do you think, who would have let that happen to her? I wish I'd fallen down there, too."

She made him sit in the chair at the writing-table and, with his elbows on the table, on the untidy pages, and his head in his grimed hands, he poured out to her about the woman in the cellar. Christina listened and she said that the woman was very likely dead when they lifted her. "You couldn't see if she was alive, could you?" she asked.

"No—but she'd been calling out, or someone had from down there. Her daughter had heard them. The other fellow was running in—if I could have held on to her one split second longer! How *couldn't* I have held her?"

"Well," said Christina, "you did what you could. You're not to blame for the weakness you have in your limbs at the present time, now are you?"

"Oh, Christina, I'm made up of weakness—there's nothing else in me! People don't know it—they think I'm as good as they are. They trust me as they trust each other—they take for granted some common basis for reliability that I haven't got. Why don't I tell them I'm wrong somewhere? If a man's blind he lets people know, doesn't he? He doesn't offer himself as a guide. Why don't I tell them they can't trust me? But I don't tell them. I let them fall.

"Do you remember I told you about those two fellows?"

"The young men that got shot pinning up a copy of your newspaper," said Christina.

"It was nothing to do with physical weakness that time. I was perfectly fit, it was months before I got ill. It was my fault. I made a mistake and sent them to get shot. Not one of the others would have made that mistake of sheer blundering stupidity. They trusted me."

She opened her lips.

"Don't say it!" he stamped his foot under the table. "They were bound to be got sooner or later and shot"—I know that's what you meant to say, like you said that woman might have been dead. Or she might have died anyhow afterwards. What difference does that make to me? You say it wasn't my fault that my arms gave—but it's always been the same. Always, everyone I've ever loved, and everyone I've wanted to help, I've done nothing but let them fall. Christina, you know if the town was taken to-morrow, what would probably happen to me?"

"It's best not to worry," she said soothingly, from her aerie so far above all worry for the future.

"Is it? And if it is, why should I have the best? I escape too easily. Like those bombers do their damage and then fly off far beyond it, far out of reach. I can fly away, too, where I can't be got at. But I don't know if pure physical torment wouldn't fix that—tie me down, I mean, so that I couldn't escape. That would be fair, wouldn't it?"

He began to cough. The smoke was in his throat. Christina had closed the window to keep the smoke from the burning square out of the room.

She patted him on the back while he coughed. It was his first bodily experience of her peculiar insensitive heavy-handedness and he thought she would pound him to death before he could gather breath to gulp "Stop!" at her. Then she stood looking at him.

"Christina, I'm so appallingly thirsty. Could you possibly boil me a cup of tea?"

"Wouldn't I do more for you?"

Christina stooped and put her arms round him. She did

not know what effect on him she expected. She had been excited by her hand on his back when he was coughing.

"There, there!" she murmured, taken aback by his shaken clinging to her.

"Oh, I'm so afraid, Christina!"

"Of the prison camp, is it?"

"I can't face it."

She saw that in his agony of sobbing, his gaze started over her shoulder towards the sick bed, and as though the eyes in the discoloured face there might open and see him, he struggled to get a grip on himself. Christina fiercely tightened her arms round him.

"You're so wonderful to me, Christina—forgive me for this! I don't know what's up with me. You're so wonderful, and I shall probably repay you by landing you in trouble for having me in your house. I've never thought of that. It's the same as always, you see—I'll make you curse me, too. I'm no sort of good to anyone, living. I'd much better be dead."

She pressed his face to her breast. The back of her hand had a long, red scratch across it, done by Achilles's finger nail in a spiteful pet that evening when she left him to go up to her night's vigil. She didn't trouble to lock him in, these nights. He had believed her that if he followed her up here again she would take the kitchen poker to him. Perhaps she might really beat him. How scared of her he was now, and well he might be!

She bent her head at last and began to murmur in Michael's ear. She could not tell if she reached him through his tears and the noise that went on inside both their heads. It was not like speaking to him, but as though he were asleep and she was whispering her secret to him.

"There isn't anything to be afraid of. I'd be better dead, too. That's why I'm not fearing. Who'd want to die alone? But there's worse could happen than dying with someone you love—with their arms round you. It'll happen easy—*easy*—when the time comes. We'll be together, and if it's wrong, could we wake to a place worse than this is?"

He raised his head and shifted himself apart from her, blowing his nose. He grinned foolishly. His eyes went past her, over to Moira.

"My lord—how she'd despise me, and she'd be right!"

Christina's shoulders were sore where his hands had clung. The grey velvet where his head had pressed was rubbed and damp.

He went on staring into the shadows that hid Moira and, for the first time, he envied her lying still there, not seeing nor hearing, nor feeling, nor knowing.

"Are you there, M'Clane?"

"Oh, God!" said Michael.

Francis Harte did not wait to be answered or admitted. He thrust his head through the door he opened.

"Ah, you're here, are you? I took a chance on it. I didn't think you'd be out in the mess-up. Look here, will you do a job of work for us?"

He noticed nothing. If Michael had looked in any degree normal he might have been struck by that. The poet's face showed dirty white where it showed at all under the film left by the smoke on top of the grime of days of not washing. The blue on his jaw had sprouted short, black bristles, and the palisade was whirling.

Christina regarded him implacably but he paid no attention to her. He did not glance suspiciously or slyly from

her in the lovely grey velvet to Michael. No, to him she was still Madame who scrubbed the stairs herself, and who never had a pencil on her to write receipts, who was now making herself useful by emptying slops for Mr. M'Clane's sick wife. The blood rose in her pale cheeks, just as if he had struck her there. There was one assertion she could make of an intimate higher footing with Michael. It wasn't the one she would have chosen, but it was the only one she could be sure would come off triumphantly.

"That chapter you promised to lend me to read, Mr. M'Clane," she said, "—the one that tells the mystery, isn't it?—I could take it with me now if you could spare it."

Michael looking blank and rattled, she unhurriedly repeated it. She was gratified to see Mr. Harte's rude impatience. Michael behaved rudely, too. He jerked open the drawer in the table, roughly shoving through the wads of sheets it contained.

"Here, this is it—take the thing if you want it!"

The chapter was fastened with a paper clip, and the writing, done at leisure in the weeks before the invasion, ran clear and disciplined, straight along the lines, with corrections interspersed neatly in red ink.

"Thank you very much, Mr. M'Clane. Then if you're not wanting me any more to-night, I'll read it before I go to bed, and let you have it again in the morning."

"Oh, put it down the cistern!" he muttered.

She opened and closed the door quietly.

"Look here, M'Clane. we're getting out some pamphlets. Morale's got to be kept up. It's this business of not being able to hit back when they bomb us. I thought you'd do us the pamphlet. It'll not be signed, of course. I said to

'em down at headquarters, 'Get M'Clane on to it. He has the touch for this none of the rest of us has.' ”

There was some truculence in his manner. He was prepared to gibe and bully for what he wanted. But Michael needed no bullying. At this appeal to him he was shockingly near tears again. In his simple gratitude to Harte for needing him, he would have undertaken to write fifty pamphlets and an article for the *New Challenge* into the bargain.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll do what I can. About five hundred words, do you want?”

“Pitch it strong,” said Francis, “—you know the stuff. Keep the fight in ’em. We were in a bad way, I could tell you, in some quarters long before this last fuss. People dropping off in the street from simple emptiness.”

“I know,” said Michael.

“Oh, you know, do you?” said Francis, peering at him.

The bed in its screened recess, the night-light on the bed table glimmering over the paraphernalia of nursing, caught his eyes. He had once opened the street door for Moira as she came through the vestibule, and had received her smile. He was conscious of a situation here demanding something of him in the way of realization and of uttered sympathy, but he was too tired and obsessed to achieve either.

“Well, get it done right away,” he said, “will you? and cut down to the office with it—it’s not the old office, I suppose you know—and we’ll have it out by morning.”

“The office been hit?” asked Michael.

“No. Order been received to cease publication of the *New Challenge* as being hostile to the enemy. Now what does that say to you?”

"Bad," said Michael. "Bad as it could be. I gather you're not obeying the order."

"What do you think?" said Francis. "From to-night, unless they manage to scent down our printing press where we've got it now, the *New Challenge* becomes subversive literature." He wrung Michael's hand heartily, grinning effusively, the palisade whirling, "So long, M'Clane!" A mighty yawn showed his strong, dark teeth.

"So long!" said Michael.

The poet opened the door and looked in again.

"By the way, what County did you tell me was yours?"

"Cavan."

"I'm Kilkenny. Inistioge—on a bank of the Nore."

"I spent one summer holiday there with a chap at school," said Michael. "Great night-fishing, I remember, where the river takes that bend below the birch woods, with Brandon Hill on the left."

"Great," said Francis. He closed the door again.

Michael, after he was gone, tore a sheet off his writing-block and began to try out headings for the pamphlet.

"Your courage needed," he tried. "Give it, though it's all you have left to give." He put down the pen and clasped both hands over his eyes, the pain from which ran down the sides of his nose and sideways to his temples. When he closed his eyes the pain was worse. Has she stopped crying "Mother!"? They've put her to bed somewhere and she's asleep, dreaming that there's a cellar on fire. It wakes her in such terror—as if she was a child again. "Mother, come in! I'm frightened." But nobody answers. Michael took his hands from his eyes and wrote, the words from his spasmodically jerking pen hopping up and down about the page like erratic insects.

"What can we hope from giving in?"

Have they found what they were looking for in the ruins? Do they know how to read, those two?

"The end is not yet." He crossed that out. What was he meaning by that exactly? He thought of the dead man on the bridge. There was another it was no use addressing a pamphlet to.

The air of the room seemed to be misty—was it smoke? The candlelight was like street lamplight through slight fog. She hadn't always helped her mother as she might have done, and mother had disapproved of the slacks: "But mother, mother, I did love you. Oh, mother, mother, mother!"

"I can't bear it," Michael said aloud, looking round.

He wrote, holding the pen loosely between the first three fingers: "Courage. Resolve. Hope." He had written those words fairly often, as Harte had remarked. But Great God, how was anyone in the printing office to read them? Those unformed scrawls bore no resemblance to the words. If his hand was warmer, it mightn't be so stiff. He held it over the candle flame which stung his cold palm sharply.

On the floor by the chair leg a half-filled sheet of paper had fallen. He idly stared down at it. He went to wipe Moira's lips and to see if her water bottles were still hot. When he came back, he bent and picked up the paper. The left-hand top corner was scorched. Christina must somehow have been careless with the candle. A careless woman!

With no vestige of exhilaration—like a sad child taking its mother's hand, its refuge—he took up the pen. The air exploded against his ears and he reeled in the chair and caught hold of the table. "They've begun again!" Recover-

ing his balance he began, in the exploding air, his strained hand nagging with cramp, submissively to write:

From where she stood, Molly, too, could hear what the clergyman was saying.

"This man," he was saying, "who has been found on the side of the road, lying dead—what was he called, and where he was from, we may never know here. Interment was refused him in the Catholic graveyard on the grounds that it couldn't be known for certain if he had lived in the Catholic religion. I have been appealed to, since the inquest, by many of my own parishioners not to bury him as a Protestant, on the grounds that it couldn't be known for certain he hadn't lived in the Catholic religion. 'There's nothing covered that shall not be revealed.' Until that day he's laid, with the agreement of you both, in the space that separates Catholics from Protestants in this churchyard—as on opposite sides of his grave, you're standing to listen to me now. You're after hearing the two burial services said over him. But let you not think, no one nor other of you here present, that it's as one lower down than yourselves I'm putting this man in to lie here. There's no call for charity in the case. It's with reverence I open this ground to receive his body, as St. Joseph of Arimathæa opened the good sepulchre he had ready built for himself to receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Some of you who appealed to me said to me, 'We don't know what this man was. Mightn't he have been a bad sort, with no religion at all in him?' It's true indeed we don't know what his life was. But listen to me now—he came from heaven, from his Father, to be a man in this world along with us. He was born, not into riches and prosperity,

but into poverty and hunger. The devil from outside tempted him, and who can say but he put the devil behind him? Till he was coming to Gethsemane, when the flesh was heavy on him and the spirit low, and there the devil from inside betrayed him with a kiss and pleasantness—we may be sure it was with these—to be the scorn of men. He has suffered. He is dead and buried. He may descend into hell.

“You may ask, why did he live? What purpose has been served by this one life and death? If we come near and look down into the grave before the first spadeful is thrown on; and if our thoughts rise from what is lying there to think of him ascended on the third day, or the third year, or the third thousandth year; and if, because of that thought, the understanding of one of us is deepened, after turning away from the grave, and that one in his life steps nearer to God—then this unknown dead man, despised by you, himself answers you, ‘I being lifted up from the earth, shall draw men after me.’ ”

CHAPTER IX PART ONE

I

When the first rain of spring fell, in mid May, the prisoners in Hut 17, and the prisoners in all the huts, were removed to the upper room.

Each spread his blanket on the plank bed, the shelf in the wall, he had occupied in that room in spring and summer last year, and the year before, and the year before that. This was not merely from habit. It was his statement of something, some property, belonging to him and which was recognised as his.

They had not been in the upper room three days before the lower, the winter, room was flooded from the thaw. The torrent of the rain dashed down and the floods of the thawing snow tumbled like a deep river between the two rows of the prison huts of the settlement.

In the upper room, this vast drive and sweep of the rain made them restless. They got up from lying, like men drowsed by opium, on their beds, and they moved about helplessly as sleepwalkers. There was nothing for them to do, once on their feet. The sparse routine of activities necessary to life, like keeping the stoves lighted, they performed automatically. They could perform them in their half sleep. Still, they kept waking and getting up and drifting about. But although there was such disturbed fidgeting and perambulating, they were more silent than usual. There were not the exploding gales of laughter that would rock them, while it lasted, until the tears rolled down on to their bare chests. Almost anything was enough to start

them laughing. But in the upper room Kolya did not aim a mouthful of water clean at the back of Semka's neck. Nor did Yossudar mimic the voices of Kolya when he groaned from indigestion, of Misha who had no teeth, or of the Cossack, Polkovo, when he said, "Well, here's your fodder, children!" Yossudar was a perfect mimic of voices. It was not only the expression, but the very pitch and timbre of a voice that he was able to get. The prisoners never tired of Yossudar's accomplishment. They had not so many amusements that they could afford to tire of one of them.

It was strange to see the layers of the ice panes in the two windows translucent, not with moonlight, but with the dim, grey daylight. The twelve, as they were since Kuzka and Vasya had died in early winter, when they met one another in their aimless wandering near a window, would stare at one another's faces by the unfamiliar light—staring furtively, for each, except Pashka, felt like turning his own face away when he knew it was being so scrutinised as though it was the face of a stranger. Yet they had nothing of body or spirit left to hide from one another.

Those hanging cheeks, like weighted bags, and the swollen lips over his toothless gums, were Misha. He looked like a dead man. He had been here the longest of them. But he was alive. "And so am I. I'm alive." Each whispered it to himself. "I'm alive."

When the autumn gales howled, they cursed and bickered with one another. If ever a prisoner, other than Pashka, was flogged for what passed for insubordination amongst such flattened subordinates as these were, it was in autumn. When the winter blizzards tore overhead, they piled themselves on and round the stoves, and then some-

thing, it didn't matter what, would send them into the gales of laughter. The sound of the rain, by contrast so soft and unbrutal in its might, dissolving the snow and the frost, seemed to dissolve something in the prisoners that was frozen hard in their slack bodies. The rain came down in a deluge of tears for agony of the thaw, and Kostya that night, wept a little, passingly, between waking and sleeping.

They were still three parts torpid—their opium, in even this nine months unoccupied room, being a state of slow poisoning by foul air. Their eyelids still fell heavily. Half stripped, sweating in the reeking heat from the stoves, they still lay for long stretches stupefied.

Why couldn't Pashka stay quiet? Yossudar shifted languidly to scratch, and saw that Pashka, out of his bed, was lying face downward, his two hands spread out, as he repeatedly struck the side of his head against the floor while he howled. In their new, vague discomfort of wakefulness pricking at the condition of stupor half blind, and half deaf—which was the mercy of their undifferentiated winter days and nights—it was intolerable, such a howl—like a wolf's—of anguish raw and rebellious.

"Pashka, shut up!"

"Pashka, are you mad?" whined Dianka, as it woke her.

"Yossudar, tell Pashka to be quiet!"

"Yes, tell Pashka to be quiet, Yossudar!"

Yossudar pretended to be asleep, and did not answer. He knew why they wanted him to tell Pashka, and he had his reasons for dreading to attract Pashka's attention to him.

"Pashka, be quiet!"

At last they all yelled it together, but without piercing

the wall of Pashka's frenzy of his furious grief. He would groan and hold his head with his hands. Kneeling upright, he shook his clenched fists at the roof; then, with a wail, he struck his head against the floor.

Yossudar felt that if he had to listen to it an instant longer, he would go mad. He did not want Pashka reminded of his existence, but that was not enough to restrain him. Where was there self-restraint among the prisoners? They were controlled, but it was by other forces than themselves. Either from recognition of his own impotence, or with some instinctive idea of the only freedom that remained to him, a man relinquished even the control of his body's behaviour—and that was often something to laugh at!

Yossudar cried out, beside himself, "Stop it, can't you, Pashka! Get into bed and go to sleep."

Pashka raised his head at the sound of his voice. He straightened up all his long, bony length from off the floor, but he did not go to his own bed. He crossed the room and looked down at Yossudar where he lay—at the fair, closely woven skin of Yossudar's chest, shiny with heat. No one else in the room had skin like that.

"So that's your command to me," said Pashka. "The peasant must obey,' isn't that it? Even when they're both in prison—even in heaven, even in hell—the peasant must obey the prince—isn't that it?"

"Don't talk rot. I wish you'd get into bed and stay quiet, there's a good fellow—here, keep off! Damn you, Pashka, damn you—leave me alone—I want to sleep."

"You want to sleep!" Pashka shouted. "Yes, you want to sleep because you don't dare to be awake. I'm awake. But you couldn't face what that means, could you?"

He launched himself on Yossudar and, with a straining body grip, he heaved him off the bed. They rolled on the floor together. Yossudar manœuvred for Pashka's throat. By pressure on the wind pipe he made Pashka's arms, which felt as though they were crushing his ribs, loosen and at last shift.

The ten, raising themselves in their beds, watched the two interlocked bodies in the firelight with dim wonder and fascination at a spectacle of action. To them, peering through the rancid fumes and their sapping lethargy, it was like a dream of life and vigour. Even Misha leaned over the side of his bed and blinked at the sight.

Yes, it was still Yossudar who could stand up to Pashka! He never, it was true, provoked Pashka to attack him—quite the other way. The most Yossudar wanted from Pashka was to be left in peace. But he had learned to fight as Pashka fought—as animals fight and Pashka's onslaughts on him had always ended in their mutual exhaustion. Neither had so far laid the other out. Their last fight had been a few days before they moved in to the upper room—but had it been remarked how far more exhausted Yossudar had been when they fell apart from each other than Pashka? He felt as if he had not recovered yet from that exhaustion. There was why he had wanted less than ever to risk bringing Pashka on him to-night. Pashka's strength seemed undeteriorated from what it had always been. He seemed to grow stronger, not weaker. With certain despair, Yossudar at last saw Pashka's face above him, so different a face from the others with their prison stamp of flaccidity, overfeeding and disease—Pashka's lean face terribly furrowed by his savage misery. The blood was clotted on his temples where his forehead

had banged the floor. In all the years he had known him Yossudar had never seen Pashka either laugh or smile.

"Your muscles aren't what they were when you were fresh from the mines at Nertchinsk, Yossudar!" And Pashka was not even gasping. "You're growing soft. It's because you eat and sleep. You'll be like the others soon. I could kill any one of them with one hand, only they're dead already."

He got his knee up to kick Yossudar in the stomach. Yossudar rolled, pulling himself desperately, in time to get it in the back instead. In Yossudar's mind was the echo from far away of a fight with a huge man. The man had red hair on his head and chest and arms—he was the Highland Hurtler. The sawdust smelt under the hanging flares and the guffawing, friendly crowd—the brass band of the circus was playing. He had thought he might stand up to the Hurtler, and he was still fighting, but he knew it was no longer any use. His tactics became only defensive and his lungs were bursting.

"I'll burn your heart out!" Pashka shouted.

They were close to the stove, Pashka kneeling on him. Yossudar twisted, hit out at Pashka's descending hand, but he was winded. He felt the red cinder pressed into his left breast. Pashka grunted, and threw back the cinder. He had held it in his bare hand. He got up, giving his hand a lick and then clenching it, and went to his bed where he climbed in and lay down with his face to the wall.

In the morning when Polkovo came up into the room, like a great bear, shaking the wet from his furs, with the days supplies which he had ferried over the flood from the fort on a raft—"Well, here's your fodder, children!"—Yossudar's instinct was to keep the burn covered with his

blanket so that Polkovo should not see it and ask questions. But the pain was so intense, he had to ask Polkovo for a dressing for it. Nobody told Polkovo how it had happened. The others feared that Pashka might be taken off at last and put in chains in the madhouse and then they would never be able to see Yossudar fight Pashka again. Yossudar had a stubborn shrinking from letting Polkovo know that Pashka had beaten him. Or perhaps it was that he knew Pashka was not mad.

II

When, in early summer, the huge forest trees were running with sap, shooting out life, they began to be cut down, their immense new foliage withering in the sun, by the prisoners working in shifts. With the first wood cut, the prisoners knocked together the nineteen coffins needed to bury those who had died during the autumn and winter past.

"You've got something to thank that Pashka for, Yossudar," said Polkovo when the first shift was over. He laughed, and, with careless interest, felt Yossudar's heart, as he stood, and ran a hand over the muscles of his right arm. "Yes," he said then, "run and play, child! Those other children of mine are dead beat—they've fallen down after playing at being woodsmen. They look as if they're playing at being corpses. But the sun will put life into them. They'll be real woodsmen and labourers before the summer's out. Don't lose yourself!" Polkovo bellowed jocosely after him, with a shout of laughter from nothing but high spirits in the summer day.

It was enough to make anyone laugh—the pure, brilliant air of early summer and the miraculous warmth. In a day and a night the floods had sunk into the thawed ground, and the ground was flaring with flowers. As Yossudar walked deeper into the woods, wherever he looked he saw massed yellow lilies and groves of enormous headed peonies. In the open glades between the trees, the rocks and the bare rugged ground were hidden by gentians. The sunlight, diffused, a golden green, through the tree-tops, was not yet too vivid to stab his eyes. It was the colours everywhere that dazzled him. He grasped at lilies and peonies and picked them, sinking his face in them. Such beauty!

It was not the wantonness of tropical beauty. There was no rankness and over-ripeness. It was the freshness of hardihood, the austerity and the ebullience, of shining first youth that had no prospect of age, hardly of maturity. But was it true that the snow could ever come again?

In the clearing of open ground which Yossudar had reached, out of hearing of the axes, and of sight of the falling trees, a bush of veronica grew as high as a young tree and blue, in a wide sphere from its summit to the ground, with large-sized, deep-coloured flowers.

To gaze at such radiant sweetness was not enough for Yossudar's longing spirit. He pressed himself into the blue sphere. He stretched his arms round it, and his teeth closed on the flowers gently when he felt them against his lips.

When he opened his eyes he saw the bent-shouldered and loosely jointed figure of Pashka approaching through the trees from the settlement. He felt strong irritation.

"Is the fellow following me?" he thought.

Pashka was plodding with the slow, heavy tramp of the labouring peasant over the carpet of gentians. His eyes, fixed on the ground, paid no attention to the wonderful loveliness beneath and surrounding him. Yossudar could not hope to avoid him by getting quickly behind the veronica, for Pashka already was looking at him. Then Pashka again dropped his eyes and came on at his steady, flat-footed plod. When the two were a few yards apart, he halted and looked at Yossudar again.

"You're afraid of me," he said.

The hope lighted Yossudar's mind that Pashka was going to be reasonable. If Pashka were appealing to be friends, then Yossudar, with the spring night of their last fight far behind him, and feeling so happy would be incapable of resisting that appeal.

"Why should I be afraid of you?" he asked, and he smiled a candid, questioning smile, which was just as if he stretched out his hand half shyly to Pashka in the lovely sunshine.

"Because you know I hate you," said Pashka, "and you know now I can beat you."

"Oh, damn!" shouted Yossudar, "Yes, I know you hate me, but why do you? I've never done anything to you, and you've made it so rotten for me! It's so stupid. It's such a waste."

"You're afraid of me."

"We'll get into trouble if we don't go back," Yossudar muttered. But his heart had begun to throb.

Pashka sprang for him.

The gentians were a sodden mass of mangled heads, coloured with Yossudar's blood and torn up by him in handfuls in the unimagined agony which Pashka, after a

fairly quick break through to him, had manufactured on him. Pashka stood up and began to kick his body.

"Now command me, Yossudar, give me orders to stop hurting you! The peasant must obey."

"For God's sake!" Yossudar pleaded, he hardly knew what he was saying, "For God's sake, Pashka!"

"'For God's sake!' And did the prince at home—in Ardatow—listen to me, and stop trampling me to death?" He stopped kicking Yossudar because he was breathless. "When you got here first," he said, "what a prince you were! We shocked you here. After Nertchinsk we weren't nice enough for you here. Do you remember, or have you forgotten? Well, I used to keep myself respectable, too. We only had one room but we had it neat. We respected ourselves though we were peasants! And I remember."

Yossudar moaned.

"Your precious Polkovo," said Pashka, "who you think is such a fine fellow—he's afraid of me! Why do you think they're all afraid of me here, whoever they are? It's my hate scares them! I'm not like the rest of you in prison. I keep my hate. I've a right to it. I keep my whole strong hate. I don't have your filthy loves!"

He snatched up one of the lilies Yossudar had picked, and he tore the petals into shreds. Then he bent again over Yossudar and, with deliberate hands, he increased a sharpness in his agony.

"The next time I meet you alone, Yossudar," he whispered in his ear, "I'll kill you. I never killed anyone. They said I had, but I never have. But what's the difference? I shall die here. But before that, because you can't stand up to me any more, I'll kill you."

The sun which had been Yossudar's playfellow was now

a red-hot cinder stinging his bleeding flesh. In the late afternoon, a shadow fell across his head which lay on its side with his cheek on the mashed gentians. He turned up his eyes and saw a little face leaning down to him. This little face was flushed red all over from the sun, and its skin had a smooth shining, as though it had been well polished like a cleanly kept porcelain stove. Its cheek-bones were high and prominent, it had a large wide mouth and small, bright blue eyes. It was topped with hair which was a mingling of pale brown and pale silver and plaited into a round knob on the very top of the head. It was naturally a very gay little face, though it did not look gay at coming on such a sight as this was. Yet all its concern could not dim the shining of its skin which made the face like a tiny full moon throwing back the radiance of the sun—and even still two dimples, in the middle of the cheeks where they slanted from under the jutting cheek-bones, showed indentations which would be deep little pits if she smiled.

Yossudar's swollen eyes recognised the Finnish girl whom Simtsoff, the officer commanding the new guard who had arrived last summer, had brought with him from Irkutsk. It was known among the prisoners that Simtsoff was violently jealous with his girl, and that he beat and kicked her. Last summer he had been seen to keep her on a rope tied round her waist by which he had pulled her after him everywhere he walked supervising the prisoners working. She had seemed in great fear of him and had never raised her eyes.

She placed on the ground her basket of wild raspberries and currants and, sitting down, she lifted Yossudar's head on to her lap.

He was far past trying to speak to her. He looked up from where his head lay in her lap and he saw in her small blue eyes, their brightness softened to frank mournfulness between the nearly white lashes, the knowledge of all he did not tell her.

The nature of his injuries did not appal or surprise her. She was sixteen, though she had no notion of her age, and there was nothing she had not seen of the unlimited, undisputed rights of the strong. They were a law of life to her and they were beyond her censure.

Breaking off a branch of veronica, she sturdily drove the flies from clinging to his lacerations. She took a corner of her skirt and wiped the blood and sweat and tears from his face. He lay with his face against her sun-hot arm which was flushed a pale red, like her face, and had little moles; and as often as his tears crawled out and fell, she wiped them away with her skirt. She put up her square little hand and stroked the clotted thickness of hair from his forehead. As it glinted in the sun, it was very beautiful hair, she thought.

After a certain time she bent her head down and spoke to him. He did not understand what she said. He pressed his cheek into the soft inside of her elbow, whispering, "Stay with me!" She shook her head, and irrepressibly, at the absurdity of their not being able to understand each other, a beaming smile lifted the corners of her wide mouth and crinkled her eyes until their smallness looked like no eyes at all in her little flat-featured face.

"Maja!" she exclaimed, touching the two little round ends of her collarbones above the wooden beads painted red that she wore round her neck.

"Yossudar."

It was all they could say to each other. Yossudar did not understand Finnish, and she knew no Russian.

She was afraid he would not get back to the settlement without aid, but even if she should be strong enough, she would not dare to be seen helping him to walk. Simtsoff might be angry and he so terrified her.

Anxiety showed in Yossudar's blood-filled golden eyes. He began to struggle to raise himself. She pushed him flat again into the gentians, chattering reassuring words. When she scrambled to her feet she laughed goodbye to him, and he saw her face as it was meant to be—the merriest simple little face, made from honest good-nature and from the laughter that crinkled her eyes and showed nearly all her small strong creamy teeth, two in the upper front missing.

At first after she had left him, he knew that she had gone to send someone to find him. Then, as the sun shifted, and it began to be twilight, the terror that he might die here alone to-night became more than his weakness. He believed that no one would come. Simtsoff would say, "Let the dog lie!" Polkovo would say, "Someone may as well fetch the child home," but then he would forget.

The sweat of this terror broke over Yossudar. His bed in Hut 17 became his wild longing. It was life. Slowly, for his stiffening swellings, he reached for the lower twigs of the veronica by which he began the torture of pulling himself from the ground.

III

When he heard how the prisoner had been incapacitated, who was most able for the hard labour, and the more

skilled work on the enlargement of the Cossack Fort by an extra room for the winter, Simtsoff cursed Pashka. "That Pashka—I'll break him! Yossudar's hands are worth six of the other fools' clumsy paws. He knows what he does with them. Now he won't be on his feet till the grain is sown."

In the hut they sat and watched silently when Pashka was dragged from his bed by three of the guard. He struggled without uttering a sound for every step of the way down the stairs which led to the lower room, and the fight went on in the doorway from the hut for what seemed a long time.

Polkovo set the two of Yossudar's left ribs which Pashka's kick had broken. When it was finished, he said to Yossudar, laughing, "Pashka found you asleep, did he?"

"Has he died?" Yossudar whispered.

Polkovo shrugged his shoulders.

"He's not so obliging," he answered.

Pashka was not brought back to the hut again.

Summer went on. Yossudar lay in the upper room in his miserable pain, through which he heard the hammering from below him which he knew was the coffin-making. When the hammering had ceased, he saw through the window the heavy-footed procession on its way to the dead house. The faces of the dead would not be changed. Kuzka and Vasya would look just as when each had last been sleeping on their beds—as bloodless, and their mouths still open a little, showing their teeth. It seemed as if the sunshine getting at their stiff bodies in the coffins must make them relax and breathe again. All about them was life springing up, blossoming in the warmth of the sun, from

the soaked, and then baked, earth. Only these were dead and they were being buried in the earth.

Yossudar turned his eyes away from the labouring procession. He was sickened with frantic, protesting revulsion. He was glad not to be digging the graves in the burial ground.

The dead were buried in a waste of ground on the slope behind the settlement. There had been a prisoner, Fedka, who used to occupy his spare time in carving wooden tombstones with the only names by which he had known the dead. Winter upon winter had long ago effaced "Youshka," "Ilya," "Petya," on the battered and blackened boards. Three winters back Fedka himself had died, and no one now put up wooden slabs to mark the graves.

On one of the clear, long, daylight nights the Post dashed up, with a jingle of harness bells and the drivers shouting. They brought vodka, salt, and sacks of oatmeal and flour to the settlement for the winter. With it were two prisoners in chains who had been sent from the quartz mines at Vladivostok for ten years at Verkhoyt. The two stood among the old prisoners, who had gathered to watch the Post come in; and in the morning, all standing together, they watched the Post, jingling with harness bells, and the drivers shouting and cracking their whips, dash over the rising ground away to the south on the first stage of its hundreds of miles journey to the penal settlement at Irkutsk, the nearest white settlement to Verkhoyt.

Yossudar's injuries healed slowly. Simtsoff one day came and looked at him, and told him he was now fit to work. In the magnificent weather the other prisoners crawled about the drudgery of making sound for the winter the coffins in which they rotted out their lives—as they had

hammered the coffins for those already dead—without a flicker of initiative or intelligence. They had been dulled—blurred—for precision of action, as for clear-cut thought. Their speaking even was a slovenly mumbling.

Simtsoff, irritated by the mosquitoes or chafed by the slow progress of the addition to the Fort, would sometimes order a prisoner five or six strokes for what was certainly his imbecile incompetence. Polkovo laughed at his 'children's' ineptness, with a tolerance born of superb health and of long experience of their kind.

Late one afternoon, after the corn harvest was in, Yosudar was sent into the woods to notch trees which were to be felled, the next day. He was swinging his axe when he saw that he stood at the edge of the clearing where Pashka had attacked him. There was the veronica bush, still in its full bright blue flower.

A big ball made up of moss and clay struck him on the back of the neck. He turned quickly and saw a little face peeping from behind a tree-trunk at him. The face held so much mischief and merriment, besides inquisitiveness as to what he would do, that it was a challenge he could not possibly resist. But when, dropping the axe, he got close to her tree, she darted from behind it, racing away from him on her sturdy bare brown legs. Her screams of laughter as he followed her, and they dodged each other in and out of the tree trunks were shrill with the moment's rowdy glee. She had left her basket, half full of whortleberries, behind the tree from which she had thrown the moss at him. Both of them had discarded their work, and with it their sad identities, and two children were romping in a wood, on an afternoon of glorious summer.

In the middle of boisterously dashing from his pursuit,

between two tree trunks, she suddenly threw herself on the ground. She rolled over, and sat up, regarding him, supported on her hands resting on the ground behind her. He came and curled down beside her, and they looked at each other. Laughter crinkled her lips and her twinkling blue eyes. The glaze on her skin made her face shine so burnished and cheerful, it was like looking at a bright, clean little copper bowl to see it. Her arms had lost their redness, and a covering of newly sprouted, minute white hairs showed up against their light sun brown.

In amusement at their solemn, wordless scrutiny of each other, she burst out laughing, and pointed her finger at him.

“Yossudar!”

“Maja!”

That was their conversation.

Her topknot of hair looked to him just as though placed there as a knob by which to lift her, and he reached out and pulled it. All her hair tumbled down. On top was the pale brown, but underneath was the fairness, so pale it was like silver. This discovery enchanted him. He drew her hair through his fingers, trying to separate the silver from the brown. With her first finger she touched the skin of his forearm. It chanced that they were the only two in the settlement who were fair. Maja had never felt skin on a man so smooth and fine, or hands that touched so gently.

While they sat, a leaf came drifting down as dreamily and lightly as a first flake of snow. Watching it, they had the same thought—that summer was soon over.

Maja twitched her hair from him and rolled and pinned it again like lightning into the little round topknot. Springing to her feet, she began to dance in front of him. She

stamped her bare feet heavily and clapped her hands, singing a queer little song the Finnish words of which he did not understand. Breaking it off, she flopped down beside him, her whole burnished, naïvely smiling little face an inquiry whether or not he had liked that. The gaps where two of her small teeth were gone gave her a very childish look. He pulled her head towards him by the top-knot and kissed her.

What they felt, neither associated with what they had known of passion. Passion had come to both of them, in their lives, in a dark, ugly guise. It had been without joy and was inescapable as a nightmare.

Yossudar kissed her because she was gay, and because of the afternoon that she had first found him and comforted him, and because they had played together—also because he could not help it, such frank expression of his affections being still natural to him. Yes, still!

IV

Once more they met.

It may be gathered that Yossudar, in so far as he longed for anything, longed to see her again.

The prisoners and the Cossacks, together with numbers of native Yakut workers, were kept busy, the whole length of the shortening days, felling wood for the winter. It was the frenzied protest of autumn, the shriek and writhing of agony before the numbing of winter, that moved Yossudar to dare to wander with his axe as far from the workers in his shift as the glade with the veronica; but she had never been there again.

On a September afternoon he made a last escape, instinctive but hopeless, since, in such a gathering darkness of cutting wind and incipient snow, she would never be in the woods. When, as he neared the glade, he saw her little figure pressed up to the bole of a tree, her face hidden against it, he first thought it must be a trick of the sombre light.

She was crying. They still were unable to exchange a word with each other, but Yossudar did not need an explanation of her tears. In this strange, dark life at the world's summit, in which they found themselves, both of them were captives to the same masters. They both were prisoners, without volition, without redress. He understood too well all that her captivity to Simtsoff was. In pain or fear, or both, she had run stumbling to the place where she had been so happy on a summer afternoon when she had been a child playing.

As he held her in his arms, and they clung in the bitter blast that slashed them and clawed the very tears from her eyes, Yossudar, if it can be believed, was a man. He wished to hold her tightly, so that Simtsoff would never take her and beat her again.

She raised her head from snuggling her wet face into his shoulder, to stare up at him—a last look perhaps. He saw that the red beads were gone from her neck. An angry red dent in the flesh at the side of her neck told him the beads had pressed there as the necklace was torn off roughly. Simtsoff would have thrown it in the fire.

There had been a snowfall in the night, but the wind now beat up the snow from the ground, making the air full of flakes as though a snowstorm was raging. The veronica rattled its bare boughs. It looked shrunken and woeful.

Two discoloured smudges of blue, flying from one of the inner twigs, were torn away with a sweep and scream, while he watched them, and the tree was left bare. The same gust of wind seemed to tear Maja from his arms. Running as fast as though she were being blown away from him, she vanished into the lowering dusk which, with the snow whirl, soon swallowed her stocky little figure from his sight.

He followed her more slowly through the raging woods. Life was going out in the woods with the savage howl of desolation and rebellion which was autumn. Yossudar shuddered to feel the vibration from those death pangs, and to know that the rebellion was so futile and so brief. Where the gentians had lived, there was a soddenness of fallen leaves under the harried snow. Everything died. And this thought was horror to him.

He had come out of the woods when he saw a tall figure coming striding towards him over the barren ridge which hid the settlement. The trembling that made him feel sick and that brought him to a standstill, told him that it was Pashka.

Throughout the last days of summer he had seen Pashka at a distance, working at the enlargement of the Fort. He had seemed quite recovered from his severe punishment. Except that he was more taciturn even then before, hardly ever speaking to anyone, he appeared just the same. Certainly he did not seem to have lost strength.

He was dressed in his full winter outdoor clothes. As Yossudar watched his purposeful tramping, head down and thrust forward, and long, crooked arms swinging, he thought he had never seen Pashka look more vigorous and tough.

It was his first meeting alone, or even at close quarters

with Pashka since he had seen him dragged from his bed by the three. He was alone with Pashka. Both of them were quite alone, with the darkness to cover them and the wind to bear away a scream, and Pashka would kill him here.

Yossudar watched the steadily approaching figure, and he felt that he stood within a lessening space of death. He was too nerveless with the terror of a nightmare become real to stir a foot.

Pashka stopped still in his determined pace and peered intently through the shrieking gloom and the snow swirls to see who stood there. Yossudar's bones felt turned to water. Was he going to fall?

Pashka took off his fur cap. He made the awkward bobbing reverential nod of the peasant. He said: "Good evening, Sir."

Yossudar was too stunned to answer.

Pashka raised his face to the bullying sky where the wind tore at the blackness of cloud.

"It looks," he said, "that there'll be snow. I'm on my way home before it comes down. If your honour would be so kind, there's something I should like to show you." He burrowed a hand into his coat and drew out two tiny shoes, carved out of wood and polished with fat, which lay on the palm of his hand.

"I have a baby girl, Sir—fourteen months old. Lenotchka we call her. She knows her daddy already, I can tell you that, Sir, though there's not much she can say to him yet. If daddy came home without bringing her something—well, I've never done such a thing. Only times are so hard with us. There wasn't the money, your honour, to buy my Lenotchka a toy, and so I've carved her the little

shoes. She's beginning to walk. If I give her just one finger to hold to, she trots after me anywhere in the house. It's only one room, our house is, but we keep it neat."

He put the little shoes back inside his coat, and then he glanced again at the sky.

"I'd better be on my way," he said. "I'm going home, your honour. But I think there's snow coming."

He took a step forward, but hesitated.

"I'd be glad if you'd care to visit my home with me, Sir, and see our Lenotchka." Yossudar could not utter a word. "Ah, yes, I understand," said Pashka, "you're a busy man. You've your own affairs. Another time perhaps, if you would honour us. What's your name, tell me, Sir?"

Yossudar, dumb, could only stare at him in the twilight that grew darker every moment, and the wind ravaging in straight from the North Pole and the barren fields of ice.

"Your name, Sir?"

He uttered, "Amiel Lyovitch Radovsky." The wind screamed on the words.

"Amiel Lyovitch, goodbye then," said Pashka. "It has been a great pleasure to make your acquaintance."

He made his little awkward bow again. Yossudar, like one dreaming, bowed in response. Pashka then walked briskly away, not following the route by which the Post had left, but going towards the north where lay the great forests and, beyond them, the ice fields and the frozen sea.

Yossudar, coming out of his daze, realised only then the truth of what had happened to Pashka. His mind for a moment following Pashka northwards, the frightful loneliness that lay north and south, east and west, beat on his heart, and crushed it.

He breathed fast with thankfulness to see the roofs of

the settlement, and the firelight thrown up between chinks in the wooden shutters that screened the windows until the panes of ice should freeze over. The firelight drawing him through that dark was, in soberest truth, the firelight of his home, and everyone was safely at home by now. Only he was out.

He tugged back the heavy bolt on the door of Hut 17, when the stench rising from the room down there after the biting, blowing air almost made him vomit.

V

Autumn was subdued, and night and the snow fell over the dead—where they lay in the waste ground—where they lay silent and cold in the deadhouse—where they lay in chains and screamed and laughed—and where they lay snug, neither sleeping nor waking, in the glow from the stoves.

Kostya had been laid in the deadhouse soon after daylight had ceased entirely. This was the time when most of the prisoners died.

Yossudar lay relaxed, his eyelids half covering his pupils in a temporary suspension of all voluntary action of his mind or body. A curtain had lifted in his mind. Amiel Lyovitch Radovsky. "Knocking out Macdonald was one thing," said Lindsay, "but I'll bet Radovsky a quid he doesn't stay three rounds against that chap they've got in the circus, the Hurler." "Amiel dear, your grandfather is very disgusted that you should have joined in that silly rag in Princes Street, and I'm sorry my son should have shown himself so thoughtless." "Vanya, I wish to introduce to you Amiel Lyovitch Radovsky."

He made a physical effort, he called out to Dianka, who only grunted in her apathy and did not answer him, and he managed to tug the curtain down.

The summer was like a dream remembered. Maja was in his mind. But what was there of her most clearly and unfadingly was not her sturdy bare legs running, or her tears, or her hand stroking his hair, and not even the top-knot, so like a round knob placed on her head to pick her up by. It was the queer little Finnish song she had sung while she danced. He heard it, not sung, but as though it were played by a flute against the suggestion of an orchestral background which should be night and snow. He could not get rid of it. Tormented by it, he could have cried out for Pashka to come and launch himself without warning on him and have him out on the floor. The terror of Pashka had kept Yossudar's senses on the alert through the weighing coma from this heat—as lethal, although slower by years in its action, than the cold it protected against. The terror which had kept his muscles in order had not left freedom in his mind for very much besides. And then exhaustion after a struggle with Pashka had been such complete grateful intervals of relaxed semi-oblivion, without thought.

In the hut they had few uncompelled occupations between the few routine compulsions of their life. Meals were drawn out to last as long as possible. Everyone ate his ration to the last mouthful although they were never hungry.

Proximity so inescapable, so habitual, had shed self-consciousness and had become virtual privacy. At moments of personal absorption they were no more to one another than a man's reflection visible in several mirrors is to him.

Conversation was occasional and fragmentary among the prisoners. They had said all there was to say to one another long ago. The chronic, unanswered muttering that was kept up unconsciously was from their dead selves in the shrouds to which each one withdrew after brief contact with his fellow ghosts. From the muttering, these echoes of past and gone selves, might be gathered portions of their histories when they had lived—only no one had the interest to listen.

It was conversation—not the muttering—which Yossudar heard between Kolya and Yanko whose beds were in the wall next to his.

“Kouboff said he never saw him in such a temper,” said Kolya.

Kouboff was one of the Cossacks.

“Did Kouboff tell you what it was for?” asked Yanko.

“He said it was for her meeting someone in the summer.”

They both gave vent to a stealthy snigger.

“Did Kouboff know who?”

“He didn’t know.”

“Simtsoff will soon know.”

“Yes, he’ll find out. He’ll ask her.”

“Yossudar has a pain!” exclaimed Yanko.

Yossudar had suddenly been very sick. Afterwards he lay on his side, staring up to the window above him, on ground level, which showed nothing but the dim shimmer of the pane of ice in the firelight.

It had taken three to drag Pashka from the hut, but they had not killed him. Simtsoff’s glance when it chanced on Yossudar was usually approving. It appreciated, with some wonder, that Yossudar among the prisoners, still

looked like a man—and *that*, as Polkovo said, was due to Pashka.

"The prisoner Radovsky," Simtsoff would write in his reports, "died under punishment for insubordination."

Maja would not dare to explain to Simtsoff.

"He chased you in the wood, you kissed each other, you cried in his arms—and that was all?"

No, Maja would never try to tell him.

"Here's supper, Yossudar." Kolya was standing beside him holding two plates of porridge.

Yossudar rolled over and turned his face away without answering. Kolya paid no more attention. Not to be answered was nothing out of the common. So little that anyone said was worth the effort of answering.

In the deadhouse it was so cold, and they lay there naked. Kostya lay there, who last winter had lain in the bed over there nearest the stove, warm and alive. They would lay Yossudar next to him perhaps, and when summer came again they would carry them both out into the precious sunshine.

He still felt very sick. It seemed to him that Simtsoff had unbolted the door and was coming down the steps into the room. Weak with terror, Yossudar threw himself, collapsing, on the ground at Simtsoff's feet. "Isn't there anything you can do, but not that? Take anything else—*half* kill me! But not the deadhouse!"

He woke with a scream. Someone was always waking with a scream.

"Was it a bad one, Yossudar?" asked Semka.

A nightmare—yes, perhaps the whole thing had been a bad dream. He had never heard Yanko and Kolya talking. What was a dream, and what was real? He opened his

eyes and saw the fogged fireglow and the steady movement of vermin on the wall next him. Yanko was pulling Semko off the top of the stove, near the bed in which Ezra and Anton lay locked together.

The bearskin curtain, which hung before the door to prevent the cold air from entering when the door was opened, blew inwards. So it was true, the door was opening. Yossudar fainted. Someone in the room was always fainting.

It was Polkovo who stood at the top of the steps.

"Well, children! Who's for a hand of Twenty-two?"

Their decaying faces lifted up to him as he stood there above them. Toothless children, torpid, haunted, dying children—as they gazed up at him, they smiled.

Yossudar came out of his faint but he kept his face turned to the wall.

Polkovo, at fifteen, had accompanied his father who had had a two-years' sentence in the quartz mines; and Polkovo's whole life since he was eighteen, and had joined the Cossacks, had been spent as a guard in Siberian prison camps. Tobolsk, Nertchinsk, Verkhoyt—it made no difference to him. He had enough to eat, enough vodka, and his Yakut girl, Oneena, and he was very happy.

"You're warm enough in here," Polkovo said, shaking himself, as he took off his coat. "You don't know what the wind is to-night. I've not brought any vodka to-night. We must play for love. What's wrong with Yossudar, isn't he playing?"

It was not at all like Yossudar to refuse a game. Besides it was known that he was extremely devoted to Polkovo.

"Yossudar's lazy," said Kolya.

Polkovo glanced at Yossudar's back; he had thrown an arm across his eyes. Polkovo shrugged his shoulders. Children had their moods.

For Yossudar, Kolya's remark, and the others' assenting silence—not one of them even questioning his unusual moroseness—opened a giddiness of terror. “*They know!*” They had talked in whispers when he did not hear. He might even have been seen with her. The Cossacks, who ordered instead of obeying, who made such a noise enjoying themselves in the wardroom in the Fort, who were masters of themselves, and who reserved the powers of life and death—they were open, glowing, fires of freedom, health and power, to which the prisoners were fearfully, but irresistibly, drawn. Even Simtsoff had his devotees. Who, to divert to himself the warmth of Simtsoff's passing interest, had hinted to him that his girl had met a lover in the woods?

“Hark to the wind! That'll be a blizzard before morning,” said Semka.

They paused with the cards in their hands and listened.

Pashka, who had been quiet for unusually long, began to whimper. He had been brought back to the settlement by some Yakuts who had found him lying half buried in snow a few versts off in the forest, two days after Yossudar had watched him go. His hands and feet had had to be amputated. Simtsoff had done it, and Pashka now lay in his old bed. He did not know anyone, or even know where he was.

Pashka who, between howling, used to be dumb as a stone for days and nights together, now talked incessantly in a high, hurrying voice. “Times are so hard,” he said. He would break into snatches of song. It was always the

same song, one they all knew from their childhoods. Few of them had heard very much before hearing from some woman rocking them in her lap how Kolya spent three roubles:

*"Kolya spent three roubles.
It should have been but half
Kolya kept me waiting,
And then did only laugh."*

When he heard Pashka whimper, Yossudar got out of bed. He went to the drinking bucket and brought a bowl of water to him, holding it to his lips while Pashka sucked noisily. The card players watched both of them apathetically. Only for Yossudar, Pashka would certainly be dead by now. No one else ever bothered to go near him with either food or water. There had no trace been found of the little wooden shoes.

By the time they stopped playing, the wind was the known shrieking of the blizzard. Polkovo, climbing the steps that led up to the door, opened the door a crack and closed it hastily.

"Yes, it's snowing, too," he said.

Then at last Yossudar turned his face up to him in all its imploring misery.

"Listen to me, children. I nearly forgot to mention it," said Polkovo. "If you hear anyone outside to-night—anyone pulling the bolts—don't let them come in if you want to keep out of trouble."

There was a silence of amazement. Someone outside? It was impossible.

"Who'd be out?" said old Mischa, gaping at him. "It's a blizzard."

"Maja," said Polkovo, lowering his voice. He went on

confidentially, "She's being turned out. There was someone she was seen with in September—making free of someone's arms in the woods. It was too dark at the time to see more. So I gather. She's refused to say who. I can tell you it hasn't been safe to go near him all day. Now he's turning her out. She may try to get in somewhere, so I'm dropping you the hint. Don't let the door be opened if you don't want to be in for trouble from Someone."

"She'll be buried before she's gone two steps," said Kolya.

Polkovo shrugged his shoulders, he was pulling down the visor of his bearskin cap. "If it was my girl," he said, "I'd do the same. What else? If my girl confessed, crying—I'd like her to cry a lot—I might be content, after I stamped on the fellow, to let her off with a whipping. Maja might have got no more if she'd been straight. But to refuse to give his name! What do you think of that? A man, you children, would be ashamed to put up with that from his girl."

Polkovo stood for several moments at the top of the steps while he fastened his big fur coat.

"Goodnight, Yossudar!" he called down. He was not immune to the open, ingenuous tendering of Yossudar's affection.

Yossudar's bed faced the steps. His head had fallen back and lay hidden by shadow. Yossudar was asleep, was he?

"Goodnight, my children!"

The curtain blew out horizontally as the door opened and closed quickly behind Polkovo. Such a night! Even Polkovo in his big coat, and the bearskin cap covering his nose and ears, would have a battle getting up the street to the Fort.

In his quick opening of the door, a draught of numbing air from above struck the prisoners and checked their breath when it touched them. Yossudar moved then. He sat up in bed:

"Kolya was lucky to-night," said Semka. "He's always lucky when we don't play for vodka."

"If Maja comes here," said Yossudar. Then his voice leaped his control. "When she unbolts the door," he shouted, "I'll let her in. None of you can stop me."

Nobody answered this. It might have been a drifting thought, spoken aloud, as such thought, passing reflections, were spoken—dropped into the silence without conscious intention—thoughts it was not expected, or needed, to answer.

"If we'd been playing for anything more than love, as Polkovo says, I'd not have held a card," said Kolya. "It was always that way with me."

Yossudar wished they would go on talking, but they fell silent, and then the screech of the blizzard above was so loud. Yossudar moved his eyes downward from the curtain hiding the door. There must be something that he could bear to look at. Dianka slumped in a heap at the head of her bed, met his wide eyes. Dianka had increased to enormous bulk. She raised her chin which was sunk between her breasts in her apathy which was recognised as having taken the mortal stamp. She was marked as being the next of them to drop out of her place while winter went on.

"Kolya spent three roubles.

It should have been but half—"

Pashka broke off, and moaned again for water. Yossudar stumbled from his bed. He filled the bowl from the

drinking bucket, though he spilt half the water as he carried it—not through clumsiness, but because both his hands were shaking.

Pashka's eyes, glazed, stared through Yossudar. They were the only eyes in which there was no knowledge, but no comfort was in them either. There was nothing.

The other eyes followed all Yossudar's movements—when he slopped the water, carrying it, and when he raised Pashka's head to let him gulp from the bowl. When he sat up again in his bed, listening to the shriek of the wind, they went on silently looking at him. But he no longer looked at anybody. Their look was not condemnation and not horror, any more than it was pity. To enable them to live, they had discarded pity for themselves. Even Pashka had forgotten pity for himself at last. How then should they pity another? Their look at Yossudar was simple knowledge of all that paralysed him from speaking, while Polkovo had stood on the steps, the word that might have meant no more than a beating for Maja. It was knowledge of all that had lain in his eyes' appeal, that desperate resort to their faces for something it is not in the power of the hopeless and the comfortless to give. It was knowledge of all that made him unable to lift his head and meet their eyes again. They knew what the blizzard was. When the wind sharpened to a thin wail, like a human crying, they knew why his muscles tensed and he started forward. They knew the solitude winding about him, as he sat among them, and they knew the chasm of experience widening now between him and them, which both, in the future, might speak across, but which neither would ever be able to bridge.

For Maja did not come to the door.

How long had it been? It was a deep, dark pit of time in

which he had sat with his eyes on the one knot of wood in a plank of the floor directly beneath him, until he knew the shape of that knot better than he had known anything in his life before. The wind was in him, as it cries through a hollow sounding-board, in his ears, in his head, and in his heart. And still they looked at him.

Yossudar threw himself to his feet. "You can't stop me!" He rushed up the steps—it was mad, for the door would have been bolted on the outside by Polkovo when he went away. But it had not been bolted. The bolt was rusty and difficult to draw, and Polkovo, in the blizzard, had not troubled to make it fast. The door flew open as Yossudar's weight fell against it. He staggered into the smiting darkness.

"Maja! Where are you, Maja?"

The mountainous snow engulfed and stung his half-naked body:

*"Kolya kept me waiting,
And then did only—"*

He heard no more from the hut—indeed no more at all. He lay with no more strength—having ceased to struggle in the snow where he had sunk, and the snow was striking down on him, covering him.

THE THIRTEENTH DAY

"You have took the temperature?"

"I haven't taken it yet. I was going to as you came in. I didn't expect to see you this morning, Dyàn Dutt."

Michael's voice was as hoarse as a crow. There seemed a deposit of smoke on his lungs and vocal cords. He looked at Dyàn Dutt stooped over the bed under its canopy. Had Moira's face in its brightest beauty ever have been so absorbedly, minutely scrutinised? He saw Dyàn Dutt's eyes cease their wearied blinking and steady and sharpen.

"The thermometer in place, please! I tell Madame Hamel I show up sure thing early this morning." Dyàn Dutt also spoke thickly from the smoke.

"You told her? When was that?"

"I come last night. You were gone for a walk. The temperature chart—give please!"

"She didn't tell me you came."

"No? I give her a message to give you when you come."

"She forgot I suppose. You know what it was when I got back."

Dyàn Dutt held Moira's wrist.

"What was the message?" Michael asked.

Dyàn Dutt's glance flickered towards him.

"It is a pity she forget," he said. Laying Moira's hand back, he took the thermometer from her arm-pit. It was two points higher than her temperature recorded on the chart for five days. He quickly finished the examination,

testing the reflexes and pulling out the tongue. Not content with questioning, he even examined for signs of bedsores.

"Was it something important?" Michael asked. In his sleepless condition, a faint intimation of excitement was a throbbing in his head and chest that made him feel sick.

Dyàn Dutt again stooped under the canopy and pulled up Moira's eyelid.

"You see no change since last night?" he asked, out of the scrutiny that held him.

Michael too bent and stared.

"I find I'm beginning not to look for one."

"You figure to find something big," said Dyàn Dutt. "Such as the eyes open and a smile for you. I look for a small smallness." He slid Moira's arm again from under the bedclothes, raised it and let it fall. "Now you!" he said. It felt as thin and light in Michael's fingers as a child's arm. He could see no difference in its lax falling.

"So it fall if you sleep heavy, heavy," said Dyàn Dutt. "Not so fall in the coma. And if you sleep, you—"

"God!" said Michael. He clutched Dyàn Dutt by the wrist he had lifted to look at his watch. "Look here, you can't just say that, and go! You must see I *can't* be left with her, not knowing more than that."

Dyàn Dutt studied the young man. He studied him as an instrument to be left in charge of this enthralling, phenomenal case, and he could not forgive him.

"You sleep last—when? he asked.

"Some odd times yesterday, I suppose. Why?"

"Yes, why?" Dyàn Dutt's soul clenched its hands. Night after night the man could have got six hours sleep, with Madame Hamel in charge of the patient! Michael's detaining clutch did not relax.

"So long!" said Dyàn Dutt coldly. "I scram. There are casuals, so many, at all posts. The hospital don't contain them. O. K.—Listen then! When I see your wife, quick following the accident, I don't tell you, but I think it a cinch she die. Now—"

"Now! To-day? Will it be to-day?"

"I say enough," said Dyàn Dutt austere. "I try to make it another time to-day. Till I come, do all things the same, no more. Only thing—watch her and watch her. All the time. Not one minute you don't watch her. Or Madame Hamel watch. I tell you this—something happen when you don't watch her."

"The guns have woken her," said Michael. "You'd have to be dead not to hear them."

Dyàn Dutt, at the door, turned and again studied him with a frigid regard. He said, "You look not so good. You feel damn bad, I think."

"You look all in yourself, Dyàn Dutt. How the doctors keep going beats me."

"I tell you. We sleep on our foots while we take temperatures." There fell a heavy little pause during which Dyàn Dutt's thoughts pierced Michael's singing head more clearly than his voice had done, so that he knew in advance the very expression of the glance which Dyàn Dutt now directed at the writing-table.

"All your strength," said Dyàn Dutt dispassionately, "you don't save it for your wife." That was all he said. He had reached the door, when he stood and repeated with slow emphasis, as if to a child or an idiot: "Not to leave her alone—you mind! That is of terrific importance."

"Yes, I understand. Is there nothing to do except watch her?"

"What I say—the usual. I come again if I can make it and then, if need, I tell you." His eyes roved lingeringly to the faded red back of the screen. "Your wife," he said. It was the voice in which men often spoke those two words to Michael, and in which he recognised shades of admiration, appreciation and that meditative wonder which is the oldest homage to a miracle of nature. Michael was well used to the voice, but for the first time it startled him. "Your wife," said Dyàn Dutt, "she's how much tough, Mr. M'Clane!"

"Oh, yes," said Michael.

Dyàn Dutt, after he had closed the door, re-opened it and put his head back into the room.

"You will not write," he said, "while you watch her." His head went out again, and the door shut.

It was eight in the morning. The hanging smoke above the town was being pushed lazily, in a direction from the house, by light north westerly airs. To the right, looking from Michael's window, the sun was up in a cloudless sky. It was a fine, bright March morning, though very cold. The close firing had ceased with dawn.

Michael turned back from the window. He had fed Moira before Dyàn Dutt came. After the sparkling sunshine out there, the spotted, dingy top of the sheet next her face struck him. He opened the drawer and took one of his white handkerchiefs that Christina had laundered—it was the last. He spread it over the top of the sheet. The quilts on her bed felt gritty when he smoothed them, so he carried them to the window and shook them in turn until his arms were tired and his head was swimming. The counterpane of her bed—Christina had folded and put it somewhere to keep clean. There it was, folded on top of the wardrobe. He climbed on a chair to reach it. Giddiness unbalanced

him and both feet contracted from cramp. The cheap white bedspread gave her bed a clean neat look over the faded quilts. He had adjusted it when he noticed the litter on the nursing table which her closed eyes faced. He lifted the talcum powder, eau-de-cologne and methylated spirit, and the antiseptics, into a neat group, and hid the syringe behind the glucose tin. The spirit kettle he put on the floor. With his handkerchief moistened in some cold water left in the kettle, he began to rub at the stains and rings on the table top. Or was he making them look worse? "But she won't recognise anything," he stopped suddenly and thought. But then his imagination again completely mastered his reason. He saw the room with Moira's eyes. It was like seeing it for the first time. He discovered the furniture. The room was smothered, since the night, in a fine white dust. A little mound of fallen plaster was swept under the wardrobe. The brass handles on the chest of drawers were tarnished green. That was Christina's business, to keep the room in a fit state. "She knows I don't notice." What business had a woman to be a slut? He did what he could with his moistened handkerchief for a duster.

The canopy of the sheet over the bed would hide the brown patches in the ceiling from which the plaster had fallen. The ink stains on the carpet, too, would be out of range. He picked up from the floor at the side of the bed the teapot and a dirty cup, and put them on the chair beside his own bed beyond the screen. The writing-table, in its scrambled mess of papers directly facing the foot of her bed, halted him. He picked up the sheets fallen on the floor, and the crumpled balls of discarded sheets. He tried to stack the pages into a numbered pile, but his cold fingers fumbled. An irrational horror chased him of not getting them out of

sight in time. He scuffled them all together anyhow and stuffed them into the drawer with the other chapters. The table was ingrained with ink where his pen had rolled and where the ink bottle had overturned again in a vibration. He would have put back the green, hairy tablecloth hung round with glass beads, only he couldn't find what Christina had done with it. In his search he came opposite the mirror on the dressing table which he and Christina had dragged into line with the sickbed, against the opposite wall, so that the bed was reflected in the mirror. It was not only that his face was black with smoke. He had washed his hands before attending to Moira, but he hadn't stayed for his face. His hair and his clothes were whitish-grey with the fine dust of bombed houses.

He dared not leave Moira to go to the sink in the passage, but an hour ago he had boiled up a hot-water bottle and placed it beside her. Gently slipping it out, unwrapping his pyjama jacket from round it, he poured a little from it into the washstand basin. The water was too hot and too little, but he managed to wash his face and shave. His teeth chattering, he undressed and found some clean underclothes. After consideration, he dressed himself in his grey suit. It was his newest, and he had hardly ever worn it. His heart sank as he finickingly chose between a dull green and a dull purple tie. He suspected the effect wouldn't, whichever he chose, be anything to shout over. The actions he was performing with such attention felt strange to him, as though a ghost was dressing up as its earthly self to appear in the place where it had lived. In the mirror he saw a dead-white, strained, fatigued, wild face, grotesque between the well-brushed hair and the immaculate suit. Well, it was a poor light by the bed, with the screen cutting off the window!

His eyes were so inflamed he could only half open them.

Taking a last comprehensive glance about the narrow width of the room within the radius of the screen, he noticed the Belleek pottery vase on the mantelpiece. She hated stale flowers in vases. But when he went to throw the spray out the window, he saw that the laurestinus had not withered, but had opened in water. The tight green pink-tipped buds were each a small perfect white flower. The discovery gave him a little lift of surprise and delight. He couldn't help taking it as symbolic. The buds had been locked in blind sleep; now they had woken. Michael placed the vase on the table by Moira's head. He pulled the chair to the foot of the bed and sat down with the nail file and an orange stick wrapped in cotton wool. His nails were long and very grimy. He sat quietly filing them, hearing the more distant barrage, and Moira lay motionless, breathing her rank, panting breaths. He saw her breathing now—he did not hear it. His ears with the wool in them seemed to be tightening and closing. His forehead ached.

The mantelpiece, with the vase gone, looked oddly bare. Something else had been there—Brian. She would ask where Brian was.

Michael had never instinctively wanted children. He had only sometimes speculatively thought about them. "But how she longed for a child!" he thought. She had never talked about it.

It was a quarter to ten. He had put the file away. But, sitting in unfamiliar, unoccupied passivity, he had begun to see Moira's face through a mist. So he had taken *The Lances of Lynwood* and, with one eye on the page, he read how Eustace Lynwood came to the Chateau Norbelle as

its Castellane and discovered the secret passage in the vaults:

This done, Eustace could not help standing for a few moments to look forth upon the glorious expanse of country beneath him—the rich fields, and fair vineyards spreading far away to the west and north, with towns and villages here and there rising among them; while far away to the east, among higher hills, lay the French town of Carcassonne, a white mass just discernible by the light of the setting sun; and the south was bounded by the peaks of the Pyrenees amongst which lay all Eustace's brightest recollections of novelty, adventure, and hopes of glory.

His ears, which no longer heard sounds clear cut, could not have heard the change in her breathing. As he stooped under the canopy it was with his fingers on her chest that he felt that she was breathing more quickly. He seized the respiration chart, checked it, trembling with excitement, and recorded the new count. Stooping, his thighs ached, so he knelt on the floor. Minutes passed while he watched, until it was incredible that her face should remain indifferent under his searching, questioning gaze. In twenty-one minutes, with a movement so feeble and exhausted that it was barely living; her head rolled heavily and lay face upwards, instead of on its side.

He had lost count of time. The feeble moving, more feeble than a new-born child's, of that disfigured head from its side to its back was the most miraculous thing he had ever seen. It was more wonderful than her coming into Loring's studio like a rose in a cactus bed. It was almost more than his heart could bear.

Moira's eyebrows were faintly, faintly contracted. Searching her face, blank for so long of anything that could

be imagined as proceeding from an inner consciousness, he thought he found on it the shadow of the shade of a slight querulousness. Her lips twitched.

"Moirra! Darling, did you make a sound? I can't hear you. There's such a singing in my head."

Her lips moved.

Tearing out the wool, he leaned over her and put his ear to her lips, getting the nauseous reek of her breath.

"Moirra!"

He heard a slight sound from her. Her eyelids trembled twice. They were going to lift. He waited, feeling dizzy, kneeling on the vibrating floor. A jar, which was just like that of a big ship running aground, flung him against the bed and jumbled his inside into a mixed heap. He clenched his teeth with the shock, or else they had been jolted together. A spurt of sickening pain ran from them up into his head.

Moirra, held firm in her blankets, had not been moved. He shut his eyes with the pain and the shock of noise. When he opened them he looked at his watch and saw it was an hour and a quarter since her head had rolled.

"Moirra!"

He waited.

"All right," he muttered in a harsh whisper. "I understand. I've got to help. You can't do it alone." He gently pushed aside the drab spikes of her hair and brought his lips to her ear:

"Moirra, you hear me, don't you? You know who it is. It's Michael, darling. Listen Moirra—I'm calling you back. You will come. You can. It's not you lying here. It's someone awful. But if you open your eyes, and they know me,

then it will be you. I'm not asking you to speak to me, that's too much, I know. Couldn't you open your eyes? Couldn't you try? Just once. I only ask once. For one minute—for five seconds—let me see my Moira again!

"Is that too much? Are you trying and you can't manage it? Never mind, don't get tired! You hear me, don't you? Will you move your eyelids—don't try to lift them—just a tiny flick to show you hear me? I'm waiting. I know you will.

"The tiniest flick, Moira! I'm begging! I'm praying you."

But she was not in the bed. He suddenly distinctly felt her presence hovering suspended in the air behind him as he knelt. He called out urgently to it, "Go back! Go back!"

Her eyebrows had relaxed their faint tension. Her mouth hung loosely, half open. Michael shook her by the shoulder as one wakes a sleeping person. His arm, across her over the counterpane, tightened with a crazy motion of keeping her beside him.

"Stay with me, Moira, my precious love! Don't leave me, my wife! If you leave me, you know what'll be gone. Something so live and lovely that I'll be dull and sluggish—I'll be old—without its shining on me and drawing sparks from me. My outward life will be a slovenly flabby thing without my brilliant, beautiful one. I shall crawl into my imagination, just coming out to feed myself—that'll be all. Oh, don't give me up yet! Come back, and try again at making your ideal out of me! Never mind how I kick! Nobody else cares a curse about what I'm made."

He began again: "If I could have one wish this moment, and nothing but misery ever after, it would be this: to see you walk in that door coming to me, looking as you used to.

I shouldn't care how you looked *at* me, or *what* you were going to say to me!

"Next best to that would be to see your eyes open. If you're leaving me, can't you grant me that? Say goodbye! Haven't you any pity? I don't want them to smile. Open them to tell me you loathe me. Make them say all the contempt they know how to! Only come back to me to say it. Don't leave me with nothing."

He did not hear Christina open the door and the creaking shoes cross the room. His arms were flung out over the ridge of Moira's body, and his face was hidden against it. Christina surveyed him for at least a minute before she cleared her throat.

"You'll excuse me, Mr. M'Clane, please!"

He raised his face slowly, blinking at her. He did not get up at once, even. A dead tiredness had settled on him. The woman standing there seemed to him a vague figment of memory.

She was staring in astonishment at his sleek brilliantined hair and the grey suit.

"What?" he said fractiously.

Her tone was viciously prim.

"Mr. Harte is in his room, Mr. M'Clane, and he's raging to see you."

"Blast him! I can't see him, tell him. Can't people ever, in this rotten world, leave me to myself?"

"He said if you didn't come down he'd be up into this room after you, invalid or no invalid. There'll be no stopping him."

"Oh, lord, Christina, I don't want to see him. Why the devil must people want me? I don't want them. I'm not forever running after them, pestering them."

"You put the little flower beside her," Christina said.

"Yes. It came out." His hopeless look clung to Moira. All trace of what had been the dimmest foreshadowing of animation had vanished. It was the face he had seen yesterday and last week. He bent and turned the head back on its side.

"Can you stay with her while I'm gone?" he asked Christina.

She silently seated herself on the chair at the foot of the bed.

On the stairs, as he levered himself down by the banisters both feet to a stair, a girl in a fur coat and fur hood to match, the ribbons hanging untied on her shoulders came charging upstairs from the hall, two steps at a time, and dragging a green suitcase. She was the daughter of the old Count who had planned the victory celebration. Michael remembered the eager face, rather too intense, the sharp nose and the bright dark eyes which were both innocent and hungry. The rouge looked like gashes in the hollows of her cheeks and on her mobile lips. He did not think she recognised him.

"It's all very well," she poured at him, "their telling us to stay where we are! They can't expect us to, can they? They can't stop us leaving. Wouldn't you rather a thousand million times take your chance running—even the risk of being machine-gunned from the air, than wait with your door locked and watch them march in?"

"I'm not much good at running at the moment," he said.

"Daddy will drive me perfectly mad. He won't get a move on. I don't believe he can make up his mind to come at all. He keeps on saying we ought to keep the roads clear. I hope our own troops will fire on us if we're a nuisance. I think

they ought to, don't you think so? I shouldn't care a damn about being killed by our own men. What I can't face is staying here." She charged on, her green suitcase bumping after her. He heard her calling, "Daddy! What are you waiting for? We *can't* waste any more time."

The street door was open when he reached ground level. He saw a crowd of the refugees in the doorway, staring out. The mother of the two children in the room next Michael's stood there arguing angrily with the old man, her father:

"You're so old and they're so young, and there's only me. Can I carry the three of you on my back?"

Michael knocked at Francis Harte's door which was locked. Owing to the congestion in the house, Francis now shared the room with Neumann and Dyàn Dutt. The three slept at separate times on the divan with the broken spring.

The room was in a fearful mess. The poet had been dragging papers out of a drawer in the wardrobe and tearing them in small bits. He stared at Michael.

"Good God, what's the dolling-up for?"

"It's those pamphlets, is it, Harte? I let you down, and I'm sorry. Not that it's any good saying that. Think what you like of me. You're probably justified."

Francis waved his arm impatiently.

"Leave that now—never mind about the pamphlets. They're past history. The time's gone by for them anyhow. Can you get your coat—or come without it? The Committee may listen to you. I've worn myself out talking to them since four o'clock this morning and we can't get a unanimous decision." His voice was hoarser than Michael's.

"What were you saying to them?" Michael croaked.

"I said, Let the troops clear out when they're told to. That's their business—to obey what orders are given them,

and it's a rotten business! You heard the orders, I said. There's not to be a shot fired when the town's entered. What do you say to that, for spineless, lily-livered defeatist rottenness? It makes me ashamed to be human. Was it victory was all they were fighting for? If it was, I said, they were fools to fight at all, and why the devil did they? They can't even make friends with Mammon like men. It must look like compulsion—that's why they fought. And a few thousand poor devils in uniform mowed down for the sake of a bit of realism in the stage set." A dribble hung at the corner of his mouth. He licked it in impatiently. "But there's plenty of us in the town who are not soldiers, I said, and who are not under oath to obey orders."

"And who haven't a rifle apiece," said Michael, "let alone a machine gun or a Tommy."

"Who cares? We've got a few rifles, for that matter, we can lay hands on when they're wanted."

"I suppose the police have their orders as well as the troops," said Michael, "and a few machine guns to carry them out with."

"Doesn't that point what I was saying? I'm sick at being human." Suddenly he looked at Michael. He had been speaking to the window. Michael felt as if at last, for the first time, he was near the hermit. A step nearer and he could touch him. The poet worried the corner of his inflamed right eye with his first finger.

"You're our Honorary President, M'Clane. The Society's Executive Committee is in session this minute, trying to make up its mind whether or not to call on the people to resist the enemy in defiance of the government orders. Wouldn't you agree with me, the time has come that some-

thing was done against orders? And that someone fought to the end?"

His eyes forlornly questioned.

On the outside of the slowly moving train of people in the street, an elderly woman walked, pushing an invalid chair. It was a cumbersome old-fashioned thing with an overwhelming hood, on the top of which a pile of blankets and a quilt had been roped. The foot-rest of the chair was packed with a suitcase, a kettle and a stack of books. A parrot's cage dangled, tied to the hood. Out of the black shade of the hood a very thin, crooked arm in a black sleeve was stretched out to the cage. The parrot sidled along its perch and bent its head against the bars. The finger of the thin arm scratched the bird's head weakly, then the arm dropped back under the hood. Michael, at the window, stood so near the woman pushing the chair that, as she stopped to pick up a green tome of a book which had slipped out of the chair, he could have touched the imitation fur collar on her worn, respectable coat.

It was a crowd which walked without much speaking to each other. Its sound was the screech of wheels pushed over the cobbles. Its pace was the pace of the oldest and the youngest. There were soldiers in uniform pushing the handcarts. A soldier carried a little boy on his shoulder. But he and the young woman beside him, moved at the snail's pace of the older baby who had to toddle holding to the woman's skirt because the pram was full.

"There are always some who stay," said Francis.

Michael said nothing. Francis watched the crowd. He said, forcing his voice above the whine and rattle of the wheels, "Work up the Committee, that's all that's needed.

They can work up the people afterwards and raise the fight in them."

"It'll take some raising."

"Rot, the working up's only got to be strong enough."

"Harte, I'm so sick of trying to work up people to think things! The only one thing I want is to do what I think myself and not care a damn what anyone else thinks. I—"

"I don't give a damn what you think," said Francis. "What you can get the Committee to think is all that matters."

"Perhaps the Committee think things have been hard enough and will be harder, without making them utter hell for the ones that stay."

"*You've* not felt what they've been!" the poet flared.

Michael was silent. The crowd moving at its snail's pace, the woman with the invalid chair was still only a few yards' distant along the pavement. Another book fell out and she halted to stoop for it. A group behind her—a soldier and three women with a loaded coster's barrow—divided to pass her while she stood putting the book back.

"'If you put the ultimate value on physical life, then you have lost.' You wrote that, not twelve months ago in *The Ultimatum*, M'Clane."

"I shouldn't have written it."

They had to shout at each other above the din of the wheels. The effort for their strained voices shredded their tempers.

"He shouldn't have written it! *God*, you lousy hypocrite!"

"It's not hypocritical. If you'd let me tell you—You've never given me the chance to talk rationally to you, Harte—"

"What the hell do I want with your rational talk to me? If you believe in losing your life to save it, you'll come with me to the Committee. If you agree with the government order, you'll walk out of this room, back to writing your damn trash, and I never want to speak another word to you while I'm alive."

"What do you want me to come for?" Michael shouted. "Nobody ought to come to me for anything. I'm not in the game. I'm outside it. I'm not playing—"

"That's enough nonsense now. Are you coming?"

Michael grinned foolishly.

"Sorry to have let out like that."

"It's all right," said Francis. "None of our nerves are what they were."

"No. I've been writing, listening to a clock ticking—"

"*What?*" The poet's glare, the slight froth on his lips made Michael steady himself:

"Well, what you've just quoted from *The Ultimatum*—I shouldn't have written it, not because I don't believe it now, but because I can't come to the Committee with you. I can't choose for these people to throw their frying pans and get killed. I can't choose for them what they'll get if they fight and are not killed. You can choose it for them, and you're right to. You may be right. I can't make that choice for anyone, Harte. I won't make it. I repudiate my right to make it."

"'May be right!' And that's the author of *The Ultimatum*! You drivelling, neurotic louse—"

"Call me all the names. You know as well as I do what'll happen to the ones that are left alive if we fight."

"Come on down to the Committee," said the poet in a

suddenly business-like tone, "and talk after. Or there'll not be time for any decision at all to get taken."

Michael swore.

"Take a breath and count five!" said Francis. He leaned his shoulders against the mantelpiece and spoke at a spot on the wall above Michael's head. His many discoloured teeth showed in a wolfish smile.

"He won't choose death for the poor devils and their frying pans. But his friends who put their faith in the principles they got from him—Are you choosing for the staff of the *New Challenge* what we've to hope for once the town's entered if we're *not* shot fighting? Or have you thought of us at all?"

"They've got little Achille to watch for them," Michael murmured. "He trails me—last night even!"

"Answer me!" Francis snarled.

Michael's head was throbbing. His own voice sounded dead to him. He was too tired to get the words out more than barely audibly:

"Well, we knew what we were doing. We should have known. We shouldn't have gone into it if it wasn't to be us to take the worst and give the others their chance."

"To be crucified," the poet sneered. "That's very beautiful. That was your idea, was it, when you ran your *Challenge*?"

"No. It wasn't," said Michael.

The head of the crowd had turned the corner at the top of the street. At the end of the thin, straggling tail, the invalid chair moved beside a one-legged man on crutches and a little girl carrying a bucket packed with bundles. The chair had stopped so many times that it had gradually lost its place in the middle. Another book slid out. This time

the woman pushed the chair over it, not stopping. "*That's it!*" a voice in Michael's mind said. "So you see, the sonata incident is right!" But almost immediately he was horrified at himself. What was he made of? The little girl stumbled—the bucket was too heavy for her. The book lay, a vague spot of colour, on the emptying pavement.

Francis neighed with laughter. Words shot from him like the lashes of a whip. "Gosh, the irony's lovely! You go back on every word you wrote that got them on your tail, and they don't know it! Try telling them about your nice story book when they come knocking at this door asking for you! Oh, you had it coming to you, and you deserve it, you hypocritical funk and swine, M'Clane! I apologise for interrupting the masterpiece. I was fool enough to believe the time had come when you'd tune up to reality and I could call you to down the panickers and the compromisers, and to stand up for the principles you declared. A rotten novel it sounds, by all I can hear of it." He stopped speaking and hit Michael on the jaw. It landed on Michael's ear. Francis had been in better condition and the blow was not a forceful one. Michael retaliated. He missed Francis altogether, and the swing of his arm upset his shaky balance, and he tumbled on the floor. Francis, giddy from the exertion of his blow, staggered and caught at the edge of the desk. They glared at each other out of clearing mists of dizziness. The scene was hopelessly without dignity. Michael clambered up by the aid of the door handle. He might have left the room stiffly, closing the door, not slamming it, but the longing was too strong that made him turn back and say foolishly to Francis, "I'm sorry about this. I wish, for a lot of reasons I could see this thing as you do."

"Neumann's dead," said Francis, letting go the desk.

"Shot himself early this morning. He couldn't face what you and I are in for when that knock at the door comes. Unless they shoot us after all to save trouble with us—but that's not what they do. I'd as soon they shot me, to tell you the truth."

"Well," said Michael slowly, "you've done one thing first that you can leave. I can't tell you what I'd give, Harte, to have written, while there was time, something as fine, in its way, as *The Spectral Beauty*. I think I'd give everything."

The poet was taken aback. He was, for a moment, wordless. A wave of red mounted into his gaunt, dirty face. He said, "That's not fair, M'Clane, now. I've called you a swine, and I've not altered my opinion."

"No," said Michael.

He went out of the room, again passing the huddle at the street doorway, and he started his laborious climb of the stairs. He leaned his weight on the stair-rail.

"If I could despise someone," he thought, "it would be good for me. I'd feel a better man after meeting a person I could have a thorough contempt for. I wouldn't have to let them know it. It would be enough just to feel it."

He got to the door of his room and opened it. Moira was always a fighter. "Gosh—how much more would she despise me now?

She lay just as he had left her. A faint, dark deposit had collected below her nostrils as though she were beginning a moustache. Francis and Christina's faces had this, too. It was the smoke which came in at the broken windows.

Christina still sat on the hard wooden chair at the bed's foot. Her hands were folded in her lap and she held her upper lip in her teeth. It gave her face a rather ugly, for-

bidding expression. Looking at her, Michael remembered—it all rushed over him—the nights she had sat watching—the nursing she had shared, the meals she had brought to him up the five long flights of stairs from the kitchen!

She reached a point in her mental calculations and released her upper lip. Two vertical furrows remained above her nose.

"I've brought back your chapter you lent to me," she said. "It's on the table."

"Oh—thanks." He stood resting his weight on the bed-rail at Moira's head. The familiar air of the room closed over him. The cubicle made by the screen and the two walls was once again, for a strange moment, the little cabin of a ship in which the three of them together floated, cut off from the world.

"Mr. M'Clane!"

"Christina," he said, "do you remember I said I hated not to see where I was going?"

"It's not a thing we can see," she said.

"Well, now I do see. But it's not where I thought."

"It's as good for us," said Christina, "that where we think we're going is not so often where we come to."

"I could have told you," he said, "yesterday, the development right to the finale, down to the smallest incident. It doesn't matter now. It was all wrong. You see, it turned on the fact that as a composer he was dead. And then this morning while I was watching the refugees—why should it have come to me just then? I don't know. God knows I wasn't thinking of it. Listen! A woman goes through terrible dangers. She's escaping from something—an invading army, let's say. Well, she's utterly ruthless. Quite a dull, frightened, ordinary woman. Yet now she's ruthless.

She cares nothing except to save herself. She snatches bread from starving children. When the woman with her is exhausted, she leaves her. No appeal counts with her. She even kills someone. And you see she'd taken steps to kill the baby when she knew she was going to have it. She thought it was dead. She never knew it was alive in her and fighting. It was the baby who snatched the bread, and who killed that someone—I'll write that story, Christina!"

"Was it that story you thought of, watching the refugees?" she said.

"No. That's only to illustrate to you what I'm getting at in the new conception. You'd think that woman perfectly justified, wouldn't you? You'd say she wasn't able to help herself. She was driven by the force of the life inside her that took no account of anything but its own existence. She'd say so, too. But suppose it wasn't a woman, but a man. And suppose it wasn't the tiny living germ-cell of a baby, but—mind you, *he* would never justify himself. Nobody would justify him, and he couldn't either. Yet he was driven, just as the baby drove that woman, by a life in him that cared for no one else's life. And his wife, Christina, she talks a lot of very high-flown stuff. In Chapter IX, do you remember—'There's nothing stronger than it, not love even. Deep down in you, under all that's happened, it's waiting to get hold of you again.' And in Chapter VI—'It's your music. It couldn't die, and so you couldn't.' But how would she like it if it got hold of him again? Yes, that's it—would she really be so pleased with it? Because she doesn't know really, in the least, the truth of what she's saying. Christina, the new conception—I can't *tell* you how glorious it is. It absolutely fascinates me. I'm so excited it's all I can do not to jump about and yell with it!"

Christina surveyed him. A coldness emanating from her touched him to look at her, and he took in the pursed mouth, its corners drawn down, the long eyelids drawn half down and the chin put stiffly up.

"You look shocked at me," he said.

"If I am," she said slowly with chilling if ponderous distinctness, "it oughtn't to surprise me. I might expect you to see the misery of this day and to be smiling. What feeling have you for others' suffering—except as thinking of it is a pleasure to you?"

He felt the stupid transfixion that hearing a sincere unexpected opinion of oneself often gives.

"I believe you mean it," he said with what sounded to him a fatuous snigger. Her sincerity faced him, serious and composed. "I wonder why."

"When you wrote that chapter," said Christina. Her grave glance went towards it lying askew on the writing-table.

"Oh, that. Well," he said, as she was silent, "did you like it?"

"I'm sure," she said gravely, "such a thing can be no pleasure to anyone to read."

"Oh, *pleasure!*" She remembered how he was always unreasonably irritated when he was explaining his work to her. It was as if he expected her to understand everything that came into his head to write, without anything being explained to her at all. "You're not the quickest person on the uptake are you, Christina? You do want a point laboured till the point's laboured out of it. Look here—haven't you ever, at any time in your life—even if it was only for an hour while you watched something happen perhaps—seemed to live in a sort of nightmare? As if you'd

passed temporarily into another sphere where the normal was horror; nothing else existed, and you were part of it. When you came out of it, you probably said, 'It was hell,' meaning that sensation of unearthliness—of a different sphere. Well, can't you appraise an effort to get that 'hellishness' in the sense of horrific remoteness, and get your pleasure according to how well the effort comes off?"

"But why do you want to write the hellishness?" asked Christina.

She sat very upright and quite still, except that she blinked her red-rimmed eyes which were sore from smoke. In her mind was: "He felt the red cinder pressed into his left breast." She did not want to think of it. She tried to push it away, and she thought, "We can't take much bedding. Two blankets each we might manage. Achille's strong enough to carry the quilts, too—" "She lifted her wet face from snuggling it against his shoulder for a long look—a last look perhaps—" "

"I suppose," his meditative voice broke in, "what happens simply is that I fall in love. If there's horror, I don't see it as horror or hideousness. I don't see, I suppose, even tragedy as *tragic*. It's to me all simply a part of my love, and therefore I love it. No one can help falling in love, can they? Or say why they fall."

"If it's true that no one can help falling in love, Mr. M'Clane, they can help giving way to it—and they ought to help it. The evil thoughts that come to you, you should resist them. Put them away from you. Don't let them get a hold on you, and then go giving that as your excuse for writing disgusting things down on paper to get into others' minds besides your own."

The rebuking, even accusing, severity of her gaze made

him feel that he was dwindling in size until he was a small boy of seven at the Convent School, and Sister Monica was angry with him. There was the nun's chill dignity about Christina this morning. He recognised the suggestion of injured but austere reproachfulness. The performance was rather too rigid and was heavily self-conscious, but she was not to be shaken out of it. He gave vent to an explosive hiccough of a laugh. She raised her eyebrows in surprised inquiry.

"Nothing," he said respectfully, "only tell me this—because a reaction to one's work is naturally the most interesting thing—"

"Don't play with me, Mr. M'Clane," she said, not without real dignity. "I know very well that what I say can't be important to you."

"That's not true, Christina. When you write without ever really knowing how your work is going to strike anyone, an opinion of it from someone—anyone—if anything, it's *too* important. And you're the only person who's read that chapter. And it disgusted you, did it?"

"Yes. It did," she said, stiffly composed. "It would disgust anyone."

Her composure reeled. He thought she had a pain somewhere. The muscles of her thin neck stood out in ridges. He saw her swallow, bulging her throat. Then her voice faintly pierced the rumbling and squeaking on the street below: "He should have died with her."

"Everything with wheels in the town must be being driven over the cobbles down there." It was like hundreds of pigs in a railway truck being driven to market. There was the squealing of the pigs in every pitch, the low grunting, and the screech of the rusty brakes. The slow footsteps

of the crowd were drowned by it. "A composer with a conscience—tormented by it!" he said. "What a study! They're not often."

"I'm not thinking of his conscience. I'm not meaning did he do right or wrong. But mightn't he have loved her enough! If he had opened that door and waited for her wouldn't they have gone out into the snow together?"

"But how much did he love her? That's a question."

"What would ail him to love her? There was only their two selves alone for each other. Hadn't she taken his head on her breast and dried his tears?"

Michael bent and wiped Moira's nose with cotton wool.

Christina unclasped her hands in her lap, to pull at the lapels of her brown cardigan. It was a business-like gesture. She spoke next with what was nearer to a business-like briskness than he would have thought possible to that limp voice, so often sliding away into undertones and leaving sentences unfinished. "I'm leaving the town within the hour, Mr. M'Clane."

He was startled. He straightened up quickly, and let the swab fall.

"There it is, by the leg of the bed. In a time like what we've been through in the past four days," she said, "you've took hold of queerly. Don't you think that's so, Mr. M'Clane?"

"Perhaps—yes," he said.

"But the time comes to wake up to common sense. When it's our lives to be saved—there's nothing matters but that."

The pigs were screeching and screeching.

"Though it's not the only important thing to be thought of." Her voice rose to get above the screeching and drilled at his ears. "Do you know what they'll be at, once they

occupy the town? They'll take people's money away from them." He would hardly have recognised her face with the narrowed, hardened line of the mouth. "And then I've to think of my husband. I've got the responsibility for both of us. He's as helpless as a child depending on me. I've got to do the best I can for them that's nearest to me, haven't I, Mr. M'Clane?"

"Of course you have." His voice was giving out, the wheels were screeching over it. By a pull of his whole body, it struggled to the surface. "I think you may be wise, Christina. I think everyone in this house ought to get out in time." He had a memory of her showing Moira and himself the two rooms, and the past six years lying like a discarded old suit of clothes behind him. How things had turned out!

"I hope you'll both get safe somewhere, Christina. What are your plans?"

Her answer showed a practicality that surprised him.

"When did you think all that out," he asked her.

"While you were down with Mr. Harte a while ago."

"Not until then?"

She looked at him silently. After a moment she asked, "What will you do? And Madame?" The forced shrillness of her voice did away with its expression.

"Oh, you mustn't worry about us," he croaked, "We owe you for enough already, goodness knows. You're not to give us another thought, Christina."

"You couldn't walk, wheeling her," she said.

"No. I couldn't walk."

She stood smoothing the front of her skirt in the way he knew. She wore no apron this morning, so the gesture was even more mechanical than usual. It diluted her brisk practicality with a more familiar air of slight hazy indeci-

sion. She said hesitating: "You know that you can stay here for as long as it suits you. Anything that's left in the house you can make use of."

He smiled.

"I can say thank you for that. But all the rest I have to thank you for, words simply can't say, Christina. I don't suppose there'll ever be a way I can repay you."

He held out his hand. After a hesitation she laid hers in it. She wore the green skirt and the brown cardigan which were the only clothes he remembered ever seeing her in. This morning the cardigan was buttoned up tightly, instead of hanging round her neck by the sleeves. Where a button was missing, the green lace-stitch jumper showed underneath. She was even a little paler, perhaps, than when he had first noticed her and the bones of her neck were more pronounced. He stood holding her hand, that was all. Yet he knew everything. With her head bent over him she had whispered to him. But that was a dream. He was not going to attend to a dream.

She withdrew her hand from his. Standing so near him that he smelt the taint of foodlessness on her breath, she smiled a conventional smile. But she forgot to raise her voice and the wheels buried it.

"Goodbye, Christina."

He began to follow her, but she did not wait for him. A stunning bellow of gunfire made her rock on her feet in the doorway. The noise battered at their bodies, driving out the thought of each other. It filled them with sick, nervy exasperation. Tears of it started to her eyes. She held both hands over her ears and ran, bent double, as though she ran from being stoned or whipped, along the passage to the stairhead, leaving the door swinging.

Michael closed it. He stumbled to the table by Moira's bed and tore off lumps of wool and crammed them in his ears. His heartbeats were choking him. He could not hear the door beyond the screen open again. When he saw a large woman in a fur coat and a smart felt hat standing facing the recess of the screen, it was just as if a ghost had materialised out of nowhere. It was Miss Jardine. He hardly recognised her out of her pink dressing-gown. He saw her lips move rapidly, but he shook his head. She glanced about her in a resourceful way, then she stumped across to the table. Michael followed her. Of course she had come on him standing ineffectively and at a loss! He bit his lip and was inclined to curse her.

She rummaged in her expensive handbag and brought out a peeling stub of a pencil, but she could find no waste paper. Tearing the first page of Chapter IX, Part One, out of the paper clip, she turned it over and wrote on the back, pressing hard on the blunt pencil point. When she pushed the page at him, he read in a big dashing handwriting, "I have made arrangements to leave. There wd be room for your wife. I'm sorry can't fit you, but have 2 women and Lena with me."

He was staggered. She had made arrangements. No one else had made any. He thought of the invalid chair with the parrot. No buses were running. There were no taxis to be had. She did not own a car. She took the page back from him and wrote on it. "Steam car. Room for your wife along back seat on mattress. Start at 1 *sharp*."

Far back in his memory, he heard his father saying, "Ella will blow herself up one fine day in that steam car of hers." Aunt Ella, they said, drove always pursued by wild cries of "Car on fire!" and cyclists breaking their pedals

to warn her, and men running with buckets of water. Or rather Uncle Robert drove. Aunt Ella sat smiling at the window, nodding at the cyclists and the men running with buckets, while she formed with her lips at every nod the words "Steam car!" through the enveloping clouds and the hiss and bubble of steam. Michael had never seen the car. But where had Miss Jardine found such a relic mouldering in some garage basement? He could see her buying it stolidly weeks ago, without a word to anyone, and having it put in order for this emergency. She might have driven a steam car long ago, though less spectacularly than Aunt Ella. He felt a solid strength coming from this stout woman planted on her feet set slightly apart in their smart, comfortable zipped sheepskin boots. The skin of her face sagged in folds half full, but her eyes were sharp and steady. The two women, he knew, were the mother and daughter who now shared her bedroom. She would not think it a matter for gratitude to have helped them, any more than she would expect praise for her offer to take Moira. Both were to her the natural, the common-sense things to do. This kindness working without effort or self-consciousness to such practical purpose overwhelmed Michael. Moira was his, and he loved her, but he had never thought of a steam car. He leaned over the table and wrote on the page as clearly as he could form the letters, "Thanks."

She smiled at him then, and took the pencil again and wrote rapidly: "Tuck bedclothes under her & she can be lifted on mattress as she is. Pack *small* case with change of nightie & *few* personal belongings & feeding appliances. *Write essential nursing instructions.*" She tapped each word with the pencil, her quick eyes glancing at him, and he nodded to show that he understood. She considered, and

wrote: "Hope to reach home. Will keep her with me whole way through if can manage. Give home address."

He followed the moving of the plump white fingers, the creased skin marked deeply by rings which had been taken off. Her ridged nails were filed short and unpolished. He could believe in her reaching England. She knew how to get things done. He wrote the address of the house in Dorset in block capitals. She tore the page in half and put the address in her bag. Twitching the second page of the Chapter from under the paper clip, she wrote, "Have you any money?"

He felt humiliated. All that remained of the money he had brought from England he had banked here. About thirty pounds had stood to his credit after the months they had spent here. With this he had thought of trying to get back to England. But when the contents of the banks had been called in and flown off secretly, on the verge of the invasion, the equivalent to twenty-two pounds, English money, of his had gone with it. The morning of the day before the invasion he had paid Christina for the week past, after which he had had left only the residue of that last cheque he had drawn. He owed Christina for nearly two weeks rent, but she had said he was not to think of it. She had refused to take anything even of the little he had left. And he had never even mentioned that when he had said goodbye to her! He flushed with shame and vexation. He wrote the tiny amount which was all he possessed, adding: "Colonel Vane of Framleys, Hinton St. Mary, Dorset, will look into my affairs and meanwhile will refund you all her expenses."

The poor old Colonel, a poorer man than ever now—he would be broken with anxiety for his daughter. Michael

thought of that with a mild passing surprise. He had been a sad disappointment to the Colonel, not his choice at all for a son-in-law, or as a husband for Moira.

Miss Jardine looked at the figures and glanced at him sharply. She was thinking, in this thunder, of the mother and daughter turned out of their room because they could pay no more rent. His troubled eyes met her glance casually, but she saw he had flushed. She thought penetratingly of Madame Hamel, whom she despised as an egocentric, spineless woman nursing a grudge against life which she was too timid to pay back. Miss Jardine had always known how to deal with her. She had stood for no furtive sullenness about crockery not quite clean or blankets too thin in the cold weather. But she turned in shame from the memory of her last sight of Madame scurrying along the passage from the kitchen stairs to the front door, dragging her poor little husband by the hand, to join the fugitives in the street. Every line of her had been panic. At the last, she had been stampeded by the tremendous adjacent barrage so that the sole piece of luggage she had grabbed hold of was a grotesque nigger doll she had hugged in her free arm like a baby. The sight of such hysterical unpreparedness made Miss Jardine ashamed. It was an outrage—the animal terror for her life in the woman's staring eyes.

She read Michael's half-formed words with difficulty. She had not thought much of this young man, and she had taken his atrocious writing, as tremulous as though he were ninety, for a sign of nervous stress. But now she noticed how wretchedly ill he looked. Could she possibly squeeze him into the car? No—the two women would sit on each other's knees in front beside her. Lena would have to huddle on the floor in the back, with Mrs. M'Clane laid along the

back seat. Oh, well—once freed from the responsibility of his wife, the young man would have to take his chance looking out for himself. It was true she had seldom seen a young man look in less fit state to do this. She wrote on the page in flourishing letters, "Good Luck!"

They grinned at each other. Michael bent and began to write, "I can't thank you—" She took the pencil from him, remembering something else. "Will send to carry her to the car," he read over her shoulders as she wrote. "Have her ready 12.45 *sharp*, when streets may be clearer." She held out her hand. Michael squeezed it hard in both his. She looked over at the bed and he followed her glance. When he let go her hand, she opened her bag and took out the pencil again. Bending over the table she wrote hastily: "I understand nasal feeding. Will take every care possible of her."

She was gone, leaving a slight fragrance of wealth—of Morocco leather and good perfume.

The barrage had ceased when Michael put the kettle on the spirit lamp for Moira's feed. He felt very sick and his body ached from head to foot, as if it had been battered by stones. Under the bedclothes, after warming his hands on the hotwater bottle, he turned her to lie on her front. Her long backbone was a chain of separate knobs under his fingers as he rubbed in the methylated spirit. "These will be through the skin," he thought.

After powdering her back and feeding her, he poured the contents of one hotwater bottle into the kettle to boil up again. It was boiling, when Dyàn Dutt came into the room. He did not knock for he knew it wouldn't be heard. He had a dazed look as if he were walking in his sleep. He glanced at Moira, but did not examine her.

"There has been nothing change?" he said.

Michael heard him as though from a long way off. The street under the window must be clear, he thought for he heard nothing more from down there. He shook his head in answer to Dyàn Dutt.

"I rise your hopes," Dyàn Dutt said. "Pardon. But I feel not surprised. You can tell nothing dead sure with damn bad concussion. I see no such damn bad as this."

"Is it hopeless now?" Michael shouted.

Dyàn Dutt did not hear him, so Michael went close to him and shouted it louder.

"No. No bigger hope. No smaller."

As loudly as he could force the words out, Michael asked if it would kill her to go in the steam car.

"If it's certain death, lord knows what I can do! If it's a hundred to one chance, I'll send her." *

He saw the whites of Dyàn Dutt's eyes in his amazement at the idea of the journey.

"No. I don't tell you she live in that."

"Will it kill her then?"

"I don't tell you that."

"There is a chance then?"

Dyàn Dutt was speaking earnestly, but his tired voice slipped down again after rising to begin each sentence:

"Your wife has terrific aliveness. . . . It is the desire to live. . . . It work all the time. You would not believe. . . . It turn the scale in how much of cases. . . . But who say if it's here?"

Michael poured out the second hotwater bottle into the kettle. When he looked up, Dyàn Dutt's eyes seemed fixed and he swayed slightly. Michael touched him on the arm. The arm jumped. Dyàn Dutt took out his handkerchief.

"Pardon. I go away a little then."

"You're done in, Dyàn Dutt. Lie down on my bed, can't you, and try for some sleep."

"No, no. I go back to hospital." A wondering something swam deep down in the leaden blackness of his eyes. "Awful firing, that one, yes."

Michael followed him to the door.

"Dyàn Dutt, you know what you've done for us. I can't thank you enough." He seemed always to be saying that.

Dyàn Dutt quickly shook hands, smiling, and went.

It was twenty-five minutes to one. Michael pulled her wardrobe trunk out of its corner—it had been new for their honeymoon—to search for the little blue leather case in which her cosmetics travelled. He did not find it, and he turned every drawer of hers out on the floor. He spied it at last on top of the wardrobe. It was white with dust, so he rubbed it with his handkerchief. Inside, it was empty except for a tiny travelling tablet of jasmine soap, for she hated the cracked soap in railway cloakrooms. Into the pockets for cold cream jars and lotion bottles, he fitted the swabs, the feeding-tube, disinfectant, methylated spirit and boracic powder, and the glucose tin now only a quarter full. He wrote out the nursing routine slowly in block letters and fastened it with a paper clip to the edge of one of the pockets. The only nightdress she had clean was a mauve satin one she had never liked, so he had left it to the last to put on her. He rolled it up now and placed it in the case. Under it in the drawer there lay *Lenore* in its blue velvet protective covers. Michael lifted the book. "Personal belongings," he thought. There was the inscription in its small crabbed writing. Yet his hand had shaken when he wrote

it, "Moirra Vane from the author," out of all the words he had burned with.

He carried the book to the writing table. Under the inscription—but the words trembled at the point of his pen, so many words they would cover the page. An hour would not be long enough, nor the fly-leaf large enough, for all the words that he could have written. He wrote, "For Moirra again—from Michael," and the date. No one would think the two inscriptions were by the same hand. She would think he was drunk, or dying, when he wrote it. But he laid the book under the mauve nightdress, and closed and locked the case.

Lifting the blankets at the end of her bed, he wrapped a woollen muffler round the pair of his knitted stockings already on her pale bony feet. He rolled her on to her side, holding her with his arm across her back, while he turned in the sides of all the bedclothes to lie smoothly under her. If she had not grown so light he could never have managed it. As it was, the exertion was really too much for him. He had an attack of vertigo before it was finished. He had to close his eyes and stand still. It seemed that if he moved a step he would be over the edge of a deep pit. His head partly cleared and, stooping cautiously, he raised her feet and gathered the bedclothes round them in a sort of bag. Her nutria coat he got out of the wardrobe and laid it on her over the quilt. It had been her mother's wedding present. She had had it remodelled twice because she said she would never afford to have another fur coat all the rest of her life. He looked round carefully and thought he had done all he could to make her ready. For three minutes longer he had her with him. He knelt on the floor, resting his arms on the bed.

"Moirá darling!" His voice was quite gone. He could not have raised it to shout another word. "I love you," he whispered, close to her ear. He could not ever hear himself. "And you love me. All the rest is nothing. Why shouldn't you have thought I ran away from the war? All my life I've run away from things. I've never been able to stop seeing them with the tail of my eye, but I've never turned and faced them. I'm weak with slackness. When I look into myself I see no shape, no outline. It's like a jelly that hasn't set. Oh, it's puerile what I see there—I loathe it! And you wanted someone you could take shelter in. Someone large that you could batter against till you were tired, and then be picked up and kissed till you were good again. But *still* you love me. . . . We never laughed very much at each other, did we? We argued, and I lost my temper and swore—and you lost yours and kept silent. . . . Pet, I'm sending you home. You'll get there before I come. Oh, get safely home! That's an order. You needed to be bullied, and I only argued with you. But I'm changing my tactics. You're to get safe through all the dangers. Nothing is to stop you. . . . Perhaps you're wise to sleep for a little longer. There's not a lot at the moment, beloved one, to wake up for. But here's another order from the bully—you're to live! Don't dare disobey that. Want to live! Do you hear that? I'm putting it in your ear, so it'll go to your brain, and sound and sound until it wakes you. Want to live! . . . There was that moment when you crossed the road without caring if you were run over or not. But even *still* you loved me. . . . And I hadn't run away! But ever since we've been here, through all the things of this war, a sort of prayer has gone on inside me, day and night, like my blood circulating, 'Let me write *Amiel*, and I'll go back and fight

in any way I'm able for.' Yes—I thought that that prayer might be listened to not to fall into my grave with all my fruit green and glued to the branch—only *Lenore*, one little forgotten apple I could leave above ground for all the wasted years. While they're being killed and killed! But still, *still* you love me. . . . It's queer, I'm realising how we've never had a home together! We've rushed through flats and furnished rooms like people pursued—as we were sometimes. But when I come back to you we'll have a home, if it's only one room we can creep into and shut the door. . . . You see I mean to live and get home, too. I don't know how long it'll be. Only I may be changed when I come back to you. As changed as your face and body are changed. It's I who may be dreadful then. Will you love me still? There are so many lives in me! I *will* live. No! No, I'll die if I ought to. . . . Pray for me that I let no one fall! I'm afraid of myself in the dark. . . . We've had some sunny, heavenly times. . . . I'm wondering—if we'd had our home, just as we imagined it that evening in *our* Petersburg, and if I'd written in my study in it all the books we talked about—would I have made you happy? I think perhaps rather unhappy. . . . In about three seconds they'll be here to take you away. Goodbye, my Moira, my child! Remember! And wait for me. Goodbye."

He held his breath and pressed his lips on her forehead. It felt slimy and almost cold.

He had hardly scrambled up before the three women, the mother and daughter and Lena, were in the room. He helped them to lift the mattress by its four corners. The young girl, the daughter, gazed fearfully at the face on the waterproof sheet and then looked away. Fascinated by repulsion, her glance slid round again. At the head of the

stairs, Lena shoved Michael to one side. "You'll fall," she said, goodnaturedly smiling. She grasped both corners of the mattress at Moira's feet with her strong, coarse hands.

Michael did not follow them down the stairs. He saw their variously betrayed terror that he was going to implore for a place in the car. He watched the three, with their mummy-like burden, crawl round the turn of the stairs to the landing directly beneath him. There they had to lay the mattress on the floor while they rested. Even Lena breathed short. Her robust peasant colour was gone, but a patchy flush of exertion had come into her face. The daughter's voice penetrated to him: "Mummy, are we going to have this awful stench in the car with us?"

He went back to his room. In contrast to his fevered preparation of Moira, he moved indolently and without aim. He was at a standstill. He could almost imagine that his heart had stopped beating. He sank into the chair at the writing table. A red book was lying there. Dreamily he stretched out his hand to it and read where he opened:

"I know not, Gaston, but the point is now not of saving my life, but the Castle. Speed, speed, Ingram! Tell the Prince, if this Castle be taken, it opens the way to Bordeaux itself. Tell him how many brave men it contains; and say to him that I pray him not to deem that Eustace Lynwood hath disgraced his knight-hood."

He sat turning the pages:

"I have often been heartily weary of garrison duty," said he, "but never can I be more weary of aught than of being looked upon askance by half the men I meet. And we may sometimes hear the lark sing, too, as well as the mouse squeak, Sir Eustace. I know every pass of my native country, and the herds of Lanquedon shall pay toll to us."

"I like that." Then he was staring at something on the table. It was a little heap of money. But he had no money. His mind worked at the problem. Miss Jardine had left the money. She had chosen a moment when he was writing and she had put it there. She had left the money for him.

He pulled the heap close and counted it. With the touch of it his lethargy broke. He got to his feet quickly, the pain in his back jabbing. Finding his pocket book, he stuffed it with the notes. He took up his overcoat and got into it and dropped into the pockets his toothbrush and a razor. The thing was to travel light. No parrots in cages—not even a bucket filled with parcels. "The thing is to be free from encumbrances." He had no encumbrances. He was as free as air.

The thing was to get downstairs. The house seemed to be quite empty. Doors swung open on the empty, wildly disordered rooms where people had slept on the floor. He had made flights in the nick of time before now. There were no taxis or buses, and he could not walk with the crowd. But there were other ways of getting out, open to someone who knew them, and who had no encumbrances and enough money.

The tempo in the street had changed. It was no longer a slow march governed by the old and the helpless. The nearest battle surged about a large blue private car which had been forced by the press to a standstill. On the car's roof, layers of blankets had been strapped. The driver leaned through his window, shaking his head. He pointed mutely to the back windows. The car was packed with people and luggage. There could not be an inch of spare room in there. But it was no good. An old woman lay on the cobblestones. A child plucked at her shawl. The child was knocked on

top of her, and bodies hid his face, with its streaming tears, from Michael's sight. "Take it quietly! The cool one gets there." He was thrown forward and jolted back. He caught at the back of a coat to keep his feet. He was falling. He was clawing at backs and shoulders to keep upright. He was pushing and stooping. He squeezed himself and forced himself. He was alone, with no one to make a way for and drag after him. So he reached the running board of the car. Now he saw the driver's face with the teeth clenched and the little frantic eyes turning. He was afraid to show his money lest it should be snatched from him, but he shook the notes in front of the driver's face. A man seized him by the waist and flung him down, and hoisted a woman carrying a baby on to the running board. "Take a mother with a child for God's sake, Sir!"

A window of the car at the back was smashed. The driver put his hands on the shoulders of the woman with the baby and pushed her from the step. She fell. The driver started the car. The woman beside him covered her eyes with her hands. A woman snatched two children back from in front of the car. The car crawled slowly. A man and woman and a child had climbed on to the roof and lay on the blankets.

Suddenly the faces were all turned up to the sky. It was an exquisite blue, faintly yellowed by the drifting, dissolving smoke. The three aeroplanes in formation were almost too high to be seen. Michael did not hear them. Only for their formation he would have thought they were birds.

The young sunlight was glittering through the smoke haze, but there was no heat in it. Michael's knees yearned towards the pavement. But not to be trampled down there! He thought of the flapping skirts and the crushing feet.

The cold, starved faces pressing gave him a sickness and horror. He was not yet half way down the street from No. 6. He could see its blue painted door hanging wide open. His right ankle went over sharply at every step on the hellish stones. The jarring of terror which this gave him vibrated up his body into his head and throbbed there. He would never get out of the crowd. He could not get to the door without falling. He clutched and staggered. "I beg your pardon! I'm ill." The faces looked dully at him. Beside the open door of No. 6 a woman stood with a pram too heavily loaded. She leaned over the handle bar, coughing. Two children about four and five were attached by toy harness with belts to the handle of the pram. They sucked their fingers greedily, their noses running. Michael pushed the limp, creased notes of his money at the woman; then he caught at the blue painted door and stumbled over the doorstep. The door swung slowly after him. He pulled it to, and shut out the street, standing alone in the narrow hall in darkness and stillness. His legs collapsed and he slid to the floor in a heap. He waited cautiously, his eyes on the stairs in front of him. When his head cleared, he began to pull himself over the cold floor by his hands. He caught at each stair with his hands, dragging his inert, trembling legs after him. Resting on a stair, he gazed curiously in at the littered bedrooms. He was alone in the house. On the stair of the top flight, he sat for a long time until his legs might have recovered strength to walk to the door of his room. The door was open as he had left it. He closed it behind him and fell on his bed. His feet stiffened with awful cramp. "O Lord, I can't stand this!" He writhed himself up and tried to rub his stockinged feet and straighten them out. The agony passed off suddenly and he lay back, the lovely

relief washing over him. He was alone. "Alone." He repeated the word. "Alone." It gave him a quiet, deep satisfaction and joy.

He lay relaxed in every limb with his sore eyes closed. He stood on a peak of the Alps looking down on the valleys and villages. But these were not Alpine villages. They were cities and forests, country villages and big rivers. The world was spread out below him. The little people were living—he could see them in every city—in every house of every city and village. In every corner of the world he was seeing them from his high mountain. It was wonderful. He watched in rapture.

Then he was flying high, high. Space was above and below him. He was exultant, exhilarated with the movement and with his strong powers.

Michael opened his eyes. The sun made a square of light on the peeling wall opposite his bed. He lay drowsy, watching it.

He was climbing the fir tree with the flat top which grew near the gate. The hassock from the schoolroom, its straw padding showing through a hole, was clutched by one of its tabs in his teeth. He mounted the familiar footholds and wedged the hassock in the fork at the top of the tree. The first despatch case he had ever owned lay already balanced on a matted tangle of the green spicy twigs. He opened it and took out his pen, the penny "Sapphire" exercise book from Brown & Nolan's, and the penny bottle of green ink. Oh, the supreme contentment and delight! "THE GHOST OF THE LAKE BY MICHAEL M'CLANE. HIS SECRET BOOK." For no one was to know. No one would see it. When it was finished—but who could look ahead as far as that in the pure thrilling joy of the present hour?

The stone wall of the Convent across the road was so high that when he walked with Bridget he could not see over it. But from where he sat in the tree, he saw over the wall into the field where cows were grazing. Far across the field on a gravel sweep before the Convent, the black figures of nuns were walking. The mild chime of a bell in the Convent floated out. He could see forward to cottages on the road past the gate, and backward to Cafferty digging in the kitchen garden. None of them could see all that he was seeing. "If Eamona sees me she'll shy balls of dirt at me!" and he bent his head low behind the branches while she passed by on the road below him, her two long black tails of hair swinging. Far away in the future someone would call him and he would have to answer. But for the present he was private and safe from being interrupted. He stood the bottle of ink on the lid of the despatch case, and opened the exercise book on his knees.

Michael opened his eyes again. The square of light was gone. He looked at his watch, but both glass and hands had been smashed while he was in the street. He sat up and put his feet on the floor. His legs felt the familiar heaviness, the stiffness and trembling, but it was not very much worse than usual. Indeed, it was some time since he had felt so alert and refreshed.

He stood at the writing table, and the bed in the screened recess gaped at him with its exposed wire springs. The drawers in the chest of drawers were all open. A little green silk vest hung out of a drawer. He took it up and held it to his face. The sour smell of the sick bed, still hanging faintly in the room, clung to it. It smelt dead. He dropped the vest back among the bright silk things in the drawer, and shut the drawer.

Yet he had not written six lines before he lifted his head to see from where he sat if her nose or lips needed swabbing. There was the stripped bed and the nursing table beside it, empty of everything except the spirit lamp and kettle and the little Belleek vase.

His hand grumbled with cramp. Pain shot about and whirled in his icy cold body. He wrote without looking up again.

When it grew too dark to keep the lines straight, he heaved up and shoved the table across the room under the window. He did not look out of the window. This evening there was no candle brought to him. He might grope down to the kitchen and try to find a candle. But the thought of the stairs in the dark was too much for him. He strained his eyes, his nose was almost touching the page. In his absorption and his deafness, the street below his window might have dissolved away like a cloud. He might have been enclosed in a bubble of silence. A sudden quiver of the floor, and of the table under his hand, might have been the familiar more distant barrage, or an unseasonable roll of thunder, or the passing over the cobblestones of a file of armoured lorries. He wrote shifting the angle of the paper to hold the last fading greyness of the light. He could have heard no knock at the street door, and not even the opening of the door, nor feet ascending the stairs. To interrupt him you would have had to lay a hand on his shoulder.

The last fading greyness of light faded, and soon it was too dark to see the paper. And soon it was quite dark.

CHAPTER XIII

At some time between six and seven, he went up the stairs to their bedroom.

Orange was there laying in their drawer her mistress's nightgowns and chemises in which she had been threading fresh ribbons. "Exploring! You can do too much of that, and you can go too far. What's wrong with staying at home, living respectable and respected? To know where we are is a blessing open to all of us, only there's such a turning of backs on it. Oh, Sir, how you did startle me! Is Madame not back yet?"

He did not reply.

"I saw her from the sewing-room window crossing the yard from the workshop, it must be a couple of hours since. Always one for a walk, healthy and strong as she is! Rain or fair makes no difference when you're those, does it, Sir? Though I said to myself, 'Miss Molly is never going out of the grounds in that old mackintosh of her uncle's!' Did you want something, Sir?"

Oh, yes, he wanted something, it was plain enough. "(Just one *want*, you are, standing with your hands in your pockets, and your watching her satin underskirt, and your not saying anything!) You're thinking perhaps, Sir, that it's getting late and it'll be dark soon. You'll learn, Sir, it's no good to worry about Miss Molly when she's off away on one of her rambles. She's one always to race ahead a good

distance before she thinks to stop and turn back. I'll give orders to wait dinner for her, Sir, shall I?"

"You were asking me something?" he said after a pause.

("Yes, I was asking you something. One would think you were never asked to give an order in the whole of your life.) You'll want dinner waited for her, Sir, will you?"

"Yes. All right," he answered. From where she stood with her mistress's satin petticoat and evening stockings over her arm, she heard the long, weighted sigh from him. She turned her deaf ear to it.

She laid the lustrous things on the bed.

"In the outlandish spots you've been in, Sir, I daresay you could be sure of nothing. There, if someone was out alone a little bit late, there'd be dangers enough to be anxious for, I don't doubt. So it's natural you should forget that this is the quietest, safest piece of countryside you could well be in. As safe as England. You should ask yourself—'What in the world could happen to Madame, or for that matter to anyone, walking in the fields about here, or on the little hills? The cottage people might strike you a bit rough, and dirtier, a sight, than you'd fancy—though not, Sir, after the queer folk you've no doubt got used to in your adventurings. But Madame would come to nothing but mannerliness along of any of the people in this part, as things are. There've been ructions up here at times, but they're past for now, Sir. It's as quiet as in England. One of the men would be glad to drive her home in his ass and cart if she was lost too far out of her way. And if you're thinking of the bogs, you needn't—for I can tell you Madame had on her house slippers when she left."

"*She's* not—" he began, and stopped. Orange hung

Molly's white dressing-gown over the back of the armchair, and struck a match from a box she took from her apron pocket, and set it to the fire.

"Now, Sir," she condescended, the flames leisurely tasting the paper and sticks, "Give me your opinion—what dress would you say Madame will be wearing to-night?"

"That's what I'm thinking of!" he exclaimed.

"*Oh*," she thought, going to draw down the window blinds, "with your looking to *me* in your want—a body would think I was on your side!" But as the ancient curtains rasped together across their pole, she threw over her shoulder in a tone she had, it is true, been careful to wring dry, "I understand, Sir, that at present it's the *ordinary* that, to you, seems the *extraordinary*." And she could not resist another furtive, fascinated glance at his yellow eyes appealing to a human being more securely situated than himself.

She fetched Molly's brocade slippers from the wardrobe and set them on the hearthrug beside the armchair.

"These chimneys all smoke something disgraceful. They'll ought to be cleaned before the winter. Miss Molly will want the fire high when she gets back."

"Back?" his mutter reached.

"It's not part of my business, Sir," she said warningly, "to know anything of any disagreement there may have been. But I feel I'm not overstepping my limits to tell you Miss Molly flies out—and then she could eat herself. There, Sir! We're not all made alike, are we? Madame has a beautiful nature if she could only live in a beautiful world." But she was stepping where it surprised her. It was as though her foot had slipped. "A word in season,"

she drew both feet back sharply within her limits, as she bent sweeping up some charred fragments of sticks in the grate with the hearth-brush, "and not a word more than fitting; but the last word he'll twist out of me on the subject! It's *her* happiness I worry sick about."

But she need not have drawn herself up to cope with any further "twisting." She had become such a remote speck, at such a far distance, that, as he strained his eyes after her in the dusk of the curtained room, he despaired of making her hear him any more. She moved to the doorway after his figure left it, and she stood watching his bent head on the stairs beneath her while he slowly descended out of her sight.

"Going into the garden, are you?" she thought. "And lost out there, I'll be bound, as much as anywhere! But its *her* happiness concerns me."

At the potato beds the gardener, Connolly, saw him; and touching his earthy cap, Connolly said, "A soft evening, Sir."

"Good evening, Connolly."

"I'd ask a trifle of sun, no more than a spoonful, and them second crop peas will be fit for table, Sir," said Connolly.

"I never sowed peas," said Amiel.

"Did you not, Sir?" said Connolly politely.

Connolly too dwindled to a far distant speck.

Amiel presently had come to the Italian garden with the sundial, in the heavy, damp charged air. Rotting apples, flattening under his feet, whispered out their dank smell. The bones of the formal garden tranquilly, indifferently crumbled under the quietly assembled weeds. He stood at

the door of the little marble summerhouse where they had stood together and stared in at the green-moulded walls.

Turning, he saw her and he could not believe she had come back.

She came by the path he had come by, through the archway of the ragged yews. The old mackintosh showed, a pale patch, in the gathering, all but gathered, darkness through which her hair too showed pale. Every firm, pensive step towards him brought nearer him that joyfully moulded shape and those shadowed colours.

She followed the path, her toe neatly and absently kicking rotting apples into the box hedging, and her head bent watching it. When she had reached the sundial she saw him. She stopped and stood, her hands deep in the huge pockets.

"What a start you gave me!" her clear, decided voice called, "I wasn't expecting to find anyone—" She crumpled over the sundial with her arms on its flat top and her head on her arms. The sound of her sobbing—could he believe it? She huddled there in her grotesque old coat, crying and crying. After some contemplation, he slowly stepped over the uprooted stones of the path and stood beside her. "Oh, Molly, Molly!" His arms were drawn to her limp, hunched-up shoulders. He naturally lifted them and turned her blotched face to rest against him. They stood pressed to each other in the lonely garden, in the darkness from which the aftermath of the sunset was gone. And still Molly in his arms cried and cried.

But what was this? It was music. It was Maja's gay little song. The merry tune, so happily accented, entered on a solo flute against a sombre drum-beat.

She felt the loosening of his arms. She looked up—and a

cold loneliness, more desolate than all her helpless sorrow for him, fell on her.

"Oh," she cried out, appalled and wringing her hands, "you're inhuman!"

For it was not too dark to hide that he was smil-

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